

When Jesus Gets to Preachin'
Luke 4.21-30
February 3, 2019
Epiphany 4C
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Last week we sat with these words from Luke chapter 4:

"[T]he scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It's Jesus first time preaching in his hometown. He emerges from a struggle with the devil in the wilderness, begins preaching around Galilee and is praised for his message and presence. So much so that word has reached home about him leading up to this first recorded sermon in Luke's gospel. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus proclaims. "And this word of good news bringing, sight giving, oppressing smashing is fulfilled right now, today, in your hearing."

When the word is fulfilled in the hearing of the people, Jesus is saying that something shifts in that room that ripples out not just through the town but through time. The interaction of speaking ancient words in a living place, receiving prophetic words with listening ears, transforms them from written words to a moment and movement of fulfillment. The words of the prophet now live across time, pulsing and waiting to be heard and received, dangerously alive and fulfilled only as they engage the active imagination of a listening congregation to embody them.

We get goose bumps when we think about the rippling consequences. We get butterflies in our bellies when we realize we're called into this story and the word is being fulfilled in our hearing right now, too. Surely the crowd in Nazareth was even more excited, even more compelled, even more motivated and inspired to embody this word they have received in their hearing. Right?

Today's gospel lesson picks up at this moment, verse 21.

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." **22** All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" **23** He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" **24** And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. **25** But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; **26** yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. **27** There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." **28** When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. **29** They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. **30** But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Wonder and amazement quickly turn to a raging desire to hurl him off the cliff. They move as one, this crowd, all being swept up into a moment of beauty and calling only to then all be swept up in a moment of violent group think as embodied prophetic justice becomes embodied blood-thirst. What's happening here in this shift from a Jesus' swooning call of anointed gospel to a distancing word of no special favors for friends and family? At first read, it sounds to me like he is riling up the audience and insulting them.

Perhaps he anticipates or even senses their collective wonder. He knows the news of his healing work has already reached them. He knows rumors are already spreading about what he is teaching and what he is capable of doing, and he is getting ahead of these rumors and assumptions by placing himself in the stories of the prophets. "Here's what you can expect from me," he seems to be saying. He tells stories of widows and lepers and foreign outsiders. He places himself alongside these "others" who are very much not the ones sitting before him today, comfortable in their

synagogue, able to afford their sacrifices, healthy enough to be clean and welcome in that sacred space, of sound mind and body as they sit there fulfilling the reading of ancient words in their hearing. He points to Elisha and Elijah and the dangerous aspects of their prophetic work, and he stands alongside them in their calling. It's as though he is telling his hometown folks, "This good news work can be done *with* you, but it isn't first and foremost *for* you."

Ruth Anne Reese notes, "here in Jesus' initial proclamation of good news, he makes it clear that he will not be a prophet who serves the special interests of his hometown but rather a messenger of good news for the whole world and especially the vulnerable."¹ Jesus is clear about his calling, clear about his priorities, clear about the heartbeat of God that he must amplify for the people whose own thoughts and fears and needs and wants are so loud in their own hearing that they can't find that Divine pulse. When the narrow teaching of my evangelical roots wants to make the whole of the Jesus story about crucifixion and resurrection, we miss the heartbeat of what he was teaching in this lesson to his hometown crowd in this moment. His ministry has a focus. His calling has a theme. His footsteps and path are leading us onto a very particular way of loving and being in this world, and that way of loving and being will FOR SURE lead Jesus to the edge of a cliff and a cross on a hill not as a blood sacrifice to an angry God but as a leader of revolutionary love that threatens the power of the empire. Jesus has come as a prophet of the subversive love of God that heals lepers good, clean folks don't want to touch, feeds widows that distracted, self-absorbed folks don't remember to prioritize, and welcomes strangers who nations demonize and certainly don't want to welcome. This is his priority above the comfortable crowd of listeners in his hometown. And, well, folks receive that about as well as he anticipates they will.

In all of this, Karoline Lewis draws our attention to Jesus' alignment with the prophets. He doesn't say a rabbi isn't welcome in his hometown or a preacher is always gonna be a kid in his home synagogue. He calls himself a prophet. And so just what does he mean by prophecy? Lewis writes, "Remembering the role of the Old Testament prophets is important for this passage. Prophecy is not about predicting the future, unless it means saying that the future is secure in God. Rather, prophets tell the truth about the present and give hope to God's presence. Jesus' sermon in Nazareth is a prophetic message. Jesus tells the truth about the realities of our world, where the lowly are looked down upon [as lazy freeloaders], where the poor sleep in cardboard boxes under freeways [in the midst of a polar vortex], where the captives remain in their prisons [because they can't afford fees and fines much less bail], where the rich

¹ Ruth Anne Reese, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2742

live exceedingly full lives [yet somehow manage to lack perspective to see beyond their own noses].”²

For the good news to be fulfilled in the hearing of this word, the people must join Jesus in his mission to heal, feed, free, and welcome. The good news of God’s favor is on everyone, to be sure, but the action of Jesus isn’t happening in the places of comfort and security if the goal in those places is to remain comfortable and secure. He is calling people who know comfort and security to walk away from it and take some extra to the ones who need it more. The notion is offensive to his hometown congregation just as it is offensive to many people today who claim to be amazed by the words of Jesus yet sit in sanctuaries of comfort and security all across our nation today without listening for the Divine heartbeat for the widow, the leper, the captive, the stranger because that heartbeat is a threat to the status quo.

And at the end of all of that, what is most amazing to me in this entire story is Jesus’ steadfast clarity. Jesus is completely and utterly aware of who he is. Jesus is completely and utterly aware of what he is called to do first, above all else. And Jesus does not apologize for this clarity—he has a limited amount of time, his actions will be part of that rippling movement of God across space and time, and he will not waste time or words assuring comfortable people about their security. His focus will be not simply be meeting and addressing the urgent needs of people who are oppressed but of shaking the systems of oppression from their foundations. He is clear about what he is called to do and does not accommodate other people’s disappointment. His vision and mission aren’t up for edit or revision. He is so stunningly clear about who he is that he will not be manipulated when other people want him to be something else. And this clarity is so strong that when his hometown wants to HURL HIM OFF A CLIFF, he just passes through the midst of them and goes on his way.

Because he has come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. He has work to do and not a lot of time in which to do it. If this crowd didn’t manage to throw him off a cliff, maybe the next one will, and he knows it. So he just passes through the mist of them and gets back to work, fulfilling the hearing of the words of the prophet in every step he takes on his path. Friends, this path is our invitation and our calling today. May God bless the reading and the hearing and the living of this word. Amen.

² Karoline Lewis, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1571, adapted with illustrations of my own