

Luke 4:21-30
January 30, 2022, Epiphany +4 C
St. Andrew, Franklin, TN

Let's begin with a recap of last's week's episode. It was the first half of this story about Jesus' sermon to his hometown friends. First, he read a portion of an Isaiah text:

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...

Then he sat down, as was the customary teaching posture of a rabbi, and he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

His mission was defined — to bring good news of liberation and recovery to people who are poor, captive, and oppressed; to people who can't see any avenue to freedom from what holds them captive. It was the year of the Lord's favor — the great re-leveling — when the mighty and the lowly are brought to an equal plane. Today's text picks up there with Jesus, in front of his home-town crowd, publicly accepting his role as the one Isaiah was writing about.

It all sounds so great to the Nazareth congregation! They're amazed at their hometown boy, Joseph's son no-less! Reports about him have been spreading all around the country — what he's done in other places, and now *here he is* — come home. Can't you just imagine their expectations?! All the wonders he will do in Nazareth! He's one of their own! What a place of privilege for Nazareth — *insider* privilege!

And then the story gets bazaar.

Jesus senses what's behind their excitement. He realizes their expectations. That they'll try to lay claim on him and impose their own ideas about what

he'll do — all for them. But that's not his mission. And he knows nobody likes a prophet who doesn't do or say what they want.

Jeremiah is a prime example. Babylon was looming on the horizon, about to lay siege on Jerusalem and take the people captive. Jerusalem's leadership refused to understand or even listen. There were plenty of feel-good prophets telling the people what they wanted to hear. And Jeremiah's words were met with open hostility — even murderous rage.

Jesus could see that the same thing would happen in Nazareth. The people would try to appropriate him for their own benefit. If there would be the re-leveling of the Jubilee, they definitely wanted to be on the lowly-lifted-upside of it. He was doing amazing things in other places, now it's their turn. Eventually they would say something like, "Doctor, bring your medicine home!" But they would soon realize the truth of his work, and that Nazareth doesn't have any more exclusive privilege than any other place, they would reject him.

He reminds them of two stories in which, though there was suffering present also in Israel, God called two prophets to ease the suffering of outsiders — people not part of their community — in one case, even an enemy. Jesus not only refuses any special or preferential treatment for his hometown crowd, he also reminds them that the blessings of God extend way beyond any exclusive group.

Well, that's not what they want to hear! Those who see themselves as belonging to the in-group of Jesus (and that would include the Church) are all too often stingy with God's blessings. The stories of the two prophets are beautiful examples of God's grace and love being so expansive that it extends beyond the limits of our imagination — certainly beyond the limits of any established religious group!

This first account of Jesus' public teaching introduces what the rest of this Gospel will lay out. Jesus' remarks about the prophets points to a vision of universal salvation that is evident throughout Luke's story. The good news of God's favor is boundless and inclusive of outsiders!

Well, that enrages the insiders to such an extent that they turn from friendly neighbors speaking well of him and appreciating his gracious words to a murderous mob. Here's where the bazaar-ness of this story gets even more strange. The description of how Jesus escaped the crowd is almost like something from a Star Wars movie — like a Jedi mind-trick, “he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” Jesus just walks calmly through the middle of the raging mob and goes on his way. Here's something interesting about the Greek word that is translated as he “went on his way”. Luke uses that same word, again and again, in chapters 9 through 19 as Jesus goes on his inexorable way toward Jerusalem. It's called the Travel Narrative. He goes on his way to the cross on which he will give his life for the sake of the whole world.

The most bazaar part of the story is that he simply passed through their clamoring attempts to hold him, and he went on his way.

There's no way the people of Nazareth — or any people, including the church — can put boundaries on Christ's mission to the world. But we do try, nonetheless. For some reason, human beings tend to think that, if outsiders are included, insiders are being short-changed — maybe even be left out all-together!

Why are we so distrusting of God, that we could become enraged about grace being extended beyond our conventional limits? Is it because we have a lack of faith in God's love and grace for us? Is that what makes us afraid we'll be left out if others (especially people we think unsuitable) will be included? Is that why we bring all our suspicions and fears and disappointments to the nearest cliff?

Maybe the best news of today's bazaar story is that Jesus just goes on his way. None of the first century people of Judea could stop him. They couldn't hold him or control him or mold him according to their own sensibilities. He simply passed through the middle of all their attempts.

Even when Jesus finally succumbed to death on the cross, that didn't stop him. Even though he became the one who was lowly, brought low to the point of being killed, it was the year of the Lord's favor, and he was raised

up! He was raised up, and he brought all of humanity with him. He didn't leave the people of Nazareth out or anybody out. In fact, he is bringing all of creation with him.

There are no exclusive holds on Jesus. There are no exclusive holds on God. And no religious in-group can claim that hold. The church for the last 2000 years has tried though. We've assumed we have insider privilege. And we've caused a lot of damage as we have tried to appropriate Jesus for our own benefit...as we've unknowingly tried to prevent the re-leveling of the Jubilee when it seemed the church was would not to be on the lowly-lifted-upside of it. We've tried to lay claim on him and impose our own ideas about what he'll do — and all for us, the church. But that's not his mission. And he has simply walked through all our clamoring attempts to hold him. He has gone on his way, and he continues to go on his way.

And the most bazaar part of the story is the best news of all.