

3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 1.23.22

Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the 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.” 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?”

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.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (397)

Why now, is the question I’ve been asking myself lately, which I think is the question behind a lot of the scripture readings we’ve heard lately. Why now? Why was Jesus to come now?

It’s a theological question. It assumes that God decided upon now, this moment in history, this what would come to be called the 1st century, what would also come to be called the fullness of time, as if now was the moment, now was the time. But why? Why now? What made this the ripe time for a new revelation, a universal revelation—God now known as embracing all humankind?

I think it’s the question behind this morning’s reading, tucked away somewhere. Or maybe it’s a question I’m bring to this morning’s reading.

Jesus has been given a scroll to read in his hometown synagogue. This, it seems, was traditional to do. Someone would offer the day’s reading from Torah and haftarah, that is from

the law and from the prophets. As for this morning, as for Jesus' doing the reading, we don't know whether he asked for this scroll, Third Isaiah, or if it was the scroll to be read that day regardless of who was to do the reading. We don't know whether he brought intention to this reading, or if it dawned on him as he read, "Okay, maybe this is it. Maybe this is what I'm to be about in this world." Good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind...

His journey to that morning had been largely about what power would animate him and what power he would exercise, most recently what *not* to do with it.

It was the power of the Holy Spirit of God. It filled him at his baptism, having descended upon him "in bodily form like a dove" in a baptism we hear of, according to Luke, only after the fact.

And now, full of it, he would be "led by the Spirit to the wilderness" where he would be tempted by the devil, this spirit of division, which was perhaps but within him. Not that that makes it any easier to deal with. The devil in your head, constantly assaulting you in your thoughts—this isn't any easier than if he were out there, independent of you, actually embodied, just walking around.

We'll hear the story more fully on the first Sunday of Lent, in about six weeks. For now, suffice it to say the three temptations were all about what he was *not* to do with this power that would, turns out, know very few limits. Able to make stones to bread, he though wasn't to see to his own survival. Moreover, he wasn't to use this amazing ability to manipulate a following, though giving bread to a people *can* win their devotion, albeit not necessarily their love. Likewise, able to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple only to be carried safely to ground below on the wings on angels, he wasn't to put on a show, wasn't to make of himself a spectacle which, though, is a reliable way to get people into your thrall.

In other words, he wasn't to exercise power as empires do, with bread and circus. These are how the brutes of imperial courts would capture the people, bread and circus, sustenance and entertainment, brutes though if looking every bit the part otherwise. Yes, emperors may wear rings of gold on their fingers. Yes, their governors may wear laurel wreaths and sashes of fine purple. But they'll all oversee a good bear-baiting with blood in their throats with hardly a thought. And don't even get them started on setting gladiators against slaves. They'll round up rabble for imprisonment or torture, either tucked away in camps, or out for the world to see in arenas. Remember, those that look good may not be good, a very hard lesson to get to stick—because sometimes beauty *is* true.

It's just so hard to tell.

There's beauty and then there's the sublime. There's the aesthetics of the unique and vulnerable, the things that are passing, are here and then gone; and then there's the aesthetics of power, the mighty and withstanding, or the perfectly formulated. And it's just so hard to tell the difference.

It's just so hard to tell the difference.

Since that time of temptation, Jesus had apparently been traveling Galilee, the region around the sea that had territories of Gentiles and territories of Jews. And word had gone out about him, reports of praise about how he presented—as one with authority, as one who was full of the spirit of truth, such that when he arrived in Nazareth people were primed, they were poised to be impressed.

What's more, this was their boy. He was *theirs*.

When the scripture he read turned out to be this one, one of the treasured texts: how perfect! Isaiah was the ur-prophet, the one whose book spanned the ur-event that had tested the people, had made them become the people they now were.

Isaiah, a long book of three parts, comes to us from three points in the people's history. The first part of the scroll spoke from the frightening time just prior to the exile, when the instability of their society could no longer be denied. Babylon was coming.

Babylon was coming, would take them, would take their treasures, their city, their people.

And so it was.

The second part of the scroll spoke from the time of exile, when the people were scattered, their ways stomped out. All they had was memories and hope.

Third Isaiah, a grab-bag of prophetic voices, speaks from what remained when the people had returned. Their land had been salted, their city burned down, their *Temple* burned down. Yet here they were, returned, repentant as it were—to repent meaning to return.

They would rebuild, and they would heed voices like the prophet who spoke in the tradition of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news..."

It was by the power of this word that the people *would* rebuild, would replant and have new growth and would eventually again thrive—good news for the poor, a binding up of the broken-hearted. This word that proclaimed liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; that proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God: by this the people

would rebuild, indeed *could* rebuild, could seek a future for themselves because recompense was coming. Vengeance was coming, so the people could get on with it.

There's some comfort in this, knowing that the past, and all its injury, all its injustice, all its infuriating unfairness, will be taken care of, which means also you can get on with the future. Revenge has this promising power.

I was listening to a podcast this week. The question before the panel was whether the Democrats should take this moment of their being in power to “pack the court,” to seat more justices on the Supreme Court. This, to make up for the debatable fact that the Republicans had done just that. When Mitch McConnell broke with norm in refusing to consider Barack Obama's nominee in the final year of his presidency, Merrick Garland, this in effect cleared a path for Donald Trump to seat three justices, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett—to pack the court, according to one of the two panelists at least.

As for me, this isn't a matter I can pay much attention to because it infuriates me, it all just seems so unfair. I'd have wanted the norms to be honored and Garland to be considered—and that departure from the norm feels to me like an original sin that calls into question everything of the court since. It calls into question the legitimacy of the court, which is a serious problem because the only currency to empower the court is the public perceiving them as legitimate. The Court doesn't have command of an army, of a police force. They don't have command of anything, but the word of the Law. So, how their *perceived* really matters.

I tell you this not to persuade you to my perspective, but just so you know where I'm coming from, landed in a place of wanting comeuppance, wanting indeed vengeance, a sudden setting to right what I feel so clearly is wrong.

I could barely listen to the podcast. It put me in a state of mind I really don't like.

I get why the people turned so suddenly on Jesus.

Did you notice this, how very suddenly they turned on Jesus? They went from speaking well of him and amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth, to being so filled with rage that they got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill where they meant hurl him off the cliff.

Why?

Why, but that he left this part out, the proclamation of the day of vengeance for their God. When reading of the scroll of Isaiah, he left this part out, though it is indeed part of the same sentence: “...he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God..." I mean, it's not as if this part is of another train of thought. It's not as if this is even a new paragraph. It's not even a new sentence, or a new phrase in an old sentence. It's the second part of one phrase. The people listening would have known. The people listening might even have been reciting it along with Jesus as Jesus read. "Roses are read, violets are blue. I love cake and so should. The end."

They'd have noticed.

What was Jesus up to here?

What was he doing, leaving off that crucial line, leaving off the generating promise, that day of vengeance for our God? That's indeed how we all move forward. That's how we regroup so to rebuild, knowing that the past will be revisited and will be set to right. Take that away from the people and what have they got?

To be fair, this isn't the first time this sort of thing has happened.

During the time when Elijah was active as a prophet, about nine centuries earlier, and a terrible drought had gripped the land, and a terrible famine came as result, there were countless widows suffering starvation. But the Lord sent his prophet to Sidon, a Gentile region, to the widow of Zarephath, whom he would console and who console him, both eating of miraculous food.

Likewise, during the time when Elisha was active as prophet, about eight and a half centuries earlier, and leprosy was a threat all over the place, many suffered its discomforts and its required isolation that it not spread to plague yet more people. But the Lord sent his prophet to Syria, a Gentile region, to Naaman, who was not just a Syrian but a commander in the Syrian army, that he, of all people, might be cured.

See, the Lord kept saving people from outside. The Lord kept saving the wrong people. So, what was the benefit of being from among his people if he kept going beyond these boundaries to rescue others instead?

You know, I once heard that German soldiers would sometimes surrender to American troops during the Second World War. They figured they'd have better reception in America as the enemy than they would in Berlin as members of Hitler's army.

When the enemy is kinder than your own Fuhrer, you throw your lot in with the enemy.

America, in all its ridiculous magnanimity. Good thing we got *that* our of our system.

That's just what I seem to remember hearing. I Google it now. I can't find evidence.

This is why Jesus mentioned Elijah after leaving out the part about vengeance. This is why he mentioned Elisha. This is why he said to the people of Nazareth, “Doubtless you’ll quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you’ll say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” Capernaum is a Gentile region. So, it’s not just that the people of Jesus’ hometown wanted him to perform messianic miracles. It’s that they wanted him to do it because he’d also done it among Gentiles, among people who weren’t them, among people who were their enemy or who at least collaborated with their enemy. They had a good God. The others had more capricious gods. Leave those others to their gods, and reserve the love of the Lord God for themselves.

They could use it. They could really use it. Life was hard for the Judeans, the Israelites, and it would get harder. In Jesus’ time, the pagan leaders were brutal and grotesque, and had power over these minority people, and often used it to brutal and grotesque ends. In the time of Luke’s writing, maybe fifty years later, it would only be more so. So, it’s not too much to hope for that the Messiah’s first stop would be to his own people. It’s not too much to hope for that he’d hold off helping others until at least the Jews were safe.

But—and this is the truly difficult part—that’s not how true and abiding safety works. If peace and health and wholeness aren’t everywhere, then they truly aren’t anywhere.

There’s a recent book out I haven’t read but would like to: *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. Heather McGhee wrote it. I’ve heard her interviewed. Turns out, middle class white people in America have preferred an impoverished public over a public that benefits Black people too. We white people would rather there be no public pools than public pools that Black people can swim in. We’d rather there be no public transit than public transit that Black people can use too. Civil rights coincide with fewer benefits to which the public can claim a right.

So, I wonder, did Jesus stand to read in the synagogue knowing he would read this scripture? Did he come to synagogue that Sabbath day with a plan to request it, to trigger this response? (Rosa Parks planned to sit in that seat on the bus no matter what. That was her plan. She’s prepared for it, and now she was ready.) Or did Jesus, in reading what was simply set for that morning to be read, come then to recognize himself, to recognize his call?

So, I also wonder, how did he come to leave that last part out? Was that something he planned to do, or something that occurred to him to do as he read?

Finally, I wonder, did he anticipate that this would trigger the reaction it did?

It's easy to see the rightness of his choice. It's easy for us to assert this was right because we're the beneficiaries of that decision, we're the beneficiaries of this God of Israel, this God who is love, deciding at last to go global.

Which has me wondering one more thing, why now? Why was now the time? This God had made several global moves, several times an embrace that suggested this was where he was headed. There was suggestion indeed from the beginning that this Lord God, this living God, who called first the Jews, had the power to embrace all, if it was though less clear that he had the will and intent to embrace all, indeed the *desire* to embrace all. So why now?

Was there something particular about this moment in history that made a move toward the whole world more pressingly needed or more ripe with the possibility of success?

Was there something about the persistence of God's first chosen people that made it so God could assume a wider gaze of love and favor, or was there something about the state of the wider world that made it so the gathering appeal of love, the generating power of love, was a turn the course of history must now take?

Were the old gods coming apart in their generating power, or was their mode of capriciousness now playing out among the populace too cruelly anymore to take?

Why now with convicted service for the sake of personal and interpersonal wellbeing? Why now with such an astonishing display of the saving power of self-giving love?

I don't know.

I don't know. I just thought I'd ask.

Thanks be to God.