

Sermon for 2-3-19
Gospel -- Luke 4:21-30
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Why are these people so angry?

In today's reading from the 4th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is preaching in the synagogue in his hometown, Nazareth, in front of what should be a friendly crowd. These are people he grew up with, fellow worshippers, neighbors, family friends. You'd think they'd be especially excited to see Jesus beginning his ministry, fulfilling his call. You'd think they'd be supportive and encouraging of their hometown hero. This man, this teacher they helped to raise up, is the long-awaited Messiah! Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Savior and Redeemer of the whole world... and he's one of them!

In the synagogue that day, things started off well enough. If you remember from last week's Gospel reading:

"[Jesus] 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."ⁱ

The folks there in the synagogue were receptive at first; at the beginning of today's reading it says "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."ⁱⁱ But then, things go south pretty quickly. Jesus talks a bit about what he did in Capernaum, and the stories of Elijah and Elisha, and by the end, Luke says, "... all in the synagogue were filled with rage."ⁱⁱⁱ They're so mad, they're ready to throw him off a cliff!

This crowd goes from speaking well of Jesus and being amazed at his gracious words to mob violence and attempted murder in a matter of minutes.

So I ask again: **Why are these people so angry?**

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Let's use our imaginations here. Imagine that it's any regular Sunday, and we're all sitting here in church, and all of a sudden, in walks Jesus. Or maybe he doesn't walk, maybe he descends through the ceiling in a ray of brilliant golden light, I don't know. Anyway, Jesus is in Christ Episcopal Church, right here in front of us, in all his holy glory.

The first thing he does is open up a Bible, to the Book of Isaiah, the 61st chapter. Imagine that he reads to us the same words he read to those folks in the synagogue two thousand years ago:

"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."

Sounds great, right?

Now imagine he closes that Bible, looks out at all of us, and says something like: "Hey good church people, it's me, the Messiah. I'm really back! Thanks for all your prayers and songs and good deeds, thanks for supporting the church and getting up every Sunday morning, thanks for believing in me even when it's not easy... But the thing is, I didn't come back for you. I'm not here to make your lives better, or to fix all your problems. I'm here for the drug addicts, I'm here for the prostitutes, I'm here for the tattooed guys on

death row and the babies having babies and the unemployed immigrants and the homeless people and the trans kids and the scary guys off their meds... I'm here for the outsiders, the ones who are hurting. I'm here to finish what I started."

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My little imaginary analogy isn't perfect, I know, but it's a start. How would you feel? How would you feel if Jesus came back and said that he wasn't here for good people like us, but for sinners and outsiders and people who *never even go to church*?

I'll tell you how I'd feel -- I'd be angry. I'd be super angry; I might even be filled with rage! I think of myself as a nonviolent person so I hope I wouldn't try to throw Jesus off a cliff, but who knows? Maybe I would.

My anger would be coming from a sense of entitlement and ownership and, if I'm honest, superiority. What about me, Jesus? What about everything I do for you, what about all the ways I serve you? I deserve your time and your attention! How can you do this to me? How can you cast me aside for people who don't even call themselves Christians? I deserve so much better!

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I think that's why the folks in the synagogue got so angry. When Jesus was reading from Isaiah about serving the poor, the captives, and the oppressed, it didn't bother anyone. Those are ancient words from Holy Scripture, words from the great prophet Isaiah, and they sound really nice on their own.

But then Jesus made it real. He made it personal. He reminded his friends and neighbors who were in the synagogue to hear him that day that they themselves were not necessarily the kind of people Isaiah was talking about! Jesus knows they've heard rumors of what he can do, the miracles he can perform, but he's not going to put on a show of his abilities just because this

is a hometown crowd. He's going to take his power where it's needed most - that is his call.

Jesus also reminds the crowds (who are already beginning to turn on him) of stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha performing great miracles for non-Israelites in the Books of 1 and 2 Kings.^{iv} Just like Elijah and Elisha before him, Jesus has not been called and anointed to stay home and serve his own people. His mission, and his ministry, are far bigger than any borders of clan or nation.

That's why the folks in the synagogue are so angry. Because Jesus doesn't belong just to them.

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I mentioned earlier that my little imaginary analogy wasn't perfect. There may be lots of reasons why, but here are two:

First, **because we are all outsiders somehow**. Each one of us has known the feeling of alienation, of being different or lacking or unacceptable, of finding ourselves on the 'wrong' side of some line of identity or ability or circumstance. Because Jesus is healing and love and light, because his mission is to seek and find the lost and comfort the brokenhearted and heal the wounded, he knows the outsider in each one of us. No matter how well we hide our shame and brokenness from each other, Jesus knows.

And second, **because Christ's love is endless**. His earthly life may have been limited, his public ministry was only three years from start to finish; but his spirit, his wisdom, and his salvation are eternal. There are no limits of time or space or distance on the cosmic fulfillment of Emmanuel, the Word made flesh. Christ was, and is, and ever shall be alive -- in this beautiful Creation, in our hearts and minds and souls, and in the still-unfolding reign of God. The Light of Christ's love shines more with each passing day, and it will never run out.

Jesus of Nazareth, our Messiah, was sent to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. Jesus wasn't sent to hand out gold stars to all of us good church people. As his loyal followers, we have two choices: we can get angry, and try to silence his message; or we can roll up our sleeves, and continue his work in the world.

ⁱ Luke 4:16-20 *NRSV*

ⁱⁱ vs. 22

ⁱⁱⁱ vs. 28

^{iv} 1 Kings 17 (Elijah and the widow of Zarephath) and 2 Kings 5 (Elisha and Naaman the Syrian leper)