

s-Epiph3C-10-Hitting Home

Isa. 61:1-4 *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me* (not lection)

Luke 4:14-30 *Teaching in Galilee* (Lections for Epiph 3C and 4C)

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HITTING HOME

Here's one for you: whenever I'm at a holiday dinner somewhere in my extended family, I'm *never* asked to say grace before we eat! Now, I could understand this if my prayers were anything like those of my great-aunt Susie, who was a hardshell Baptist preacher—she could start a-prayin' and 30 minutes later the food would be cold and the half of the kids asleep. But I always keep it short and sweet.

I'm not sure why my relatives avoid letting me do anything that has to do with my job as a minister. It's like I embarrass them some way. Maybe I'll sound too holy and that won't fit with their image of me—that little skinny girl with the smart-aleck mouth. Heck, they even apologize for cussing in front of me, as if I never pop out with a bad word or two! Frankly, it's very weird.

So, I can identify with Jesus in our story today. He's just finished performing his first miracle, according to the Gospel of John. He changed water into wine at that famous wedding in Cana. And as he sets out to begin his ministry, his long journey to preach the gospel, he naturally stops off at his home town of Nazareth. You know, visit Mom, take her to church...

But this time, Jesus has been gone a while. Since the Nazarenes have seen him last, Joseph's oldest son has been out and about, being baptized by John in the River Jordan, withstanding temptation by the devil in the desert, stretching his wings a bit and thinking things through. He's thirty years old—a middle aged man in those days—and he's more than ready to begin doing what God has called him to do. He's willing and able, competent, mature, thoughtful; he's a man, not a boy, with a man's job to do and more.

So he takes his Mom to Synagogue on the Sabbath day. That's a nice thing to do. I often see members here at this church accompanied by parents or siblings or friends. It's a pleasure to bring someone with you to church. It feels good to share the things that are important to you.

Being a grown man from this very town, Jesus has probably read scripture many times before in this synagogue, before this very group of people. And presumably, he's never said anything too earth-shaking before. It's as if one of our own church members, a middle-aged man, say, stood up and started prophesying. We'd probably say, "We knew our friend was smart and devout and all that, but where's this coming from?"!

And so, this time that Jesus attended his hometown synagogue, things weren't the same as before. He knew who he was, now. The Son of Man, the Son of God, the Beloved. When he took the scroll and unrolled it, he looked for a very special passage from the Book of Isaiah:

"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."

At my clergy Bible study class last week, we discussed these very words. My friend Rev. Jeff pointed out that this passage from the prophet could be identified as Jesus' manifesto—in other words, it's the very heart of the gospel!

The current popularity of Twitter has people thinking about how much can be communicated in a strictly limited number of words. Think about it: this could be Jesus' twitter. His answer to, "What's going on with you these days?"

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!"

Eugene Peterson's biblical paraphrase puts it in modern English:

God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free, To announce, "This is God's year to act!"

And when Jesus rolled that scroll back up and sat down, everybody's eyes were on him. When everybody was quiet with anticipation of a sermon, he just says,

"You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true, just now, in this place."

It came true, just now, right here in this place! Not just that day two millennium ago, but every day and any time that the Good News is read, or discussed, or preached, or listened to, or remembered. It came true, and it is coming true again today.

God's Spirit is upon me. At Jesus' baptism, God poured out the Holy Spirit on him and into him. He was no longer a simple man with an ordinary life. He was literally filled with the Spirit and it was bursting out at the seams. This was his impetus, his new reason for being, the source of his energy and inspiration.

How could he do so much? Because the Spirit of God was upon him. He had been chosen.

What a manifesto! What a job description! Preach God's new message of hope and love to the very people who desperately need it: the poor and downtrodden of society. Perform healings and miracles, not for rich people, but for the miserable prisoners and afflicted citizens of Israel. To break the chains of political and economic oppression, and set the burdened free—to live and work and take care of their families and to have a little joy once in a while.

THIS is the year of the Lord's favor! A special year, the Jubilee, when God steps in and sweeps everything and everybody clean. God's year to act and make all things new. And obviously, the "year of the Lord's favor" wasn't just one calendar year. It's a year without an end. We know that, because God acted then, through the living ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, and God continues to work every minute of every day through the living ministry of Jesus the Christ.

You've just heard Scripture make history. It just came true, right now.

Of course, the good people of Nazareth were not ready to hear that message! They got pretty upset with Jesus. But let's give them some slack. Were YOU ready to hear that message today? That right now, God is acting?

I don't know about you, but I'd like a little time to prepare! The Judeans had been waiting a long time for the Messiah, so long that they thought they knew what he'd look like and

how he would arrive. Jesus' words were more than startling; they were more than a little insulting. Who did he think he was? And who did he think THEY were? A bunch of hillbillies who wouldn't know a Messiah from a *meshugga*?

They just didn't like the sermon. They wanted to kill the preacher.

Now, I hope you don't feel the same way at this point. Still, if I was an effective enough preacher that you really felt that Jesus was among us today, wanting to sit down and talk business, you might after all start looking for a cliff to solve your "preacher problem."

We preachers have no choice, you know. All we can do is put the Good News out there and step back when the feathers fly. If we don't have enough courage to preach Jesus, the real Jesus, letting the chips fall where they may, then what's the point of spending a couple of days every single week trying to come up with a new way to tell the old, old story?

"Whenever Jesus encountered people, he filled them with a great sense of peace," said the preacher. "He who calmed the angry waves in the storm, calmed troubled spirits of the people too."

Which New Testament had this guy read? It doesn't sound like he was very familiar with Luke, chapter 4. Yes, Jesus often had a calming effect on people and circumstances. He did calm that stormy sea. But he also stirred things up in a big way. He called out the demons. He called up a few storms of his own for his disciples to weather.

Maybe that's when we know the real Jesus is around. Things get stirred up. There's trouble and irritation and everybody stops feeling quite so calm and self-assured. If that's true, then as a preacher I guess I ought to be sorry nobody's ever tried to throw ME off a cliff!

Seriously, coming back to the pulpit after a long hiatus, I'm tempted to start out sweetly, with a series of reassuring, undemanding sermons. But I'm not sure Jesus would approve.

Robert Capon, in his book *The Astonished Heart*, writes this: "Preaching among us has far too often turned into the mere dispensing of advice. Even worse, the advice we hand out consists of little more than exhortations about a host of supposedly achievable life-enhancements, without ever once getting within shouting distance of the astonishing gift that's been handed to us in Jesus... Our pulpits are [often] fountains of irrelevancy when they are not puddles of dullness. They soak us with helpful hints about self-improvement... the advice that if we are loving, we will find the key to earthly happiness.

"And all the while," Capon continues, "every last item in that farrago of free advice is 180 degrees off the Gospel mark."

Jesus proclaims unlimited forgiveness, not the way to perfection. He comes to us in our brokenness, in the shipwrecks of our lives... he comes bringing the possible *loss* of all peace of mind! The truth is, God and Christ save us *IN* our disasters, not *FROM* them! Look at Haiti. Did God cause all that misery? Or did God inspire so much concern and generosity from friends and strangers all over the world?

Our own disasters aren't that severe, I hope, but they're very real to us. When we're suffering, it's natural to want to hear words of comfort. So, sometimes we might not like the sermon very much. We might not be able or ready to bear the challenge in those immortal words:

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.

We want to hear that we're acceptable. But Jesus tells his audience stories about unacceptable people, outsiders, gaining God's favor. Can we with good conscience identify ourselves with the Widow of Sidon, and Naaman the Syrian? To tell the truth, aren't we much more like those average, normal members of Nazareth's synagogue? Jesus' way of turning everything upside down isn't just a challenge, it can be downright uncomfortable.

But that's the beauty of the Gospel. Jesus claims that truth for himself, and for us.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon him, to bring the world good news.

Right now, in this place, we have heard Scripture come true! Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Holy God, gracious God, we gather here, in this church, to be your people and the Body of Christ. Our primary purpose for being here is to seek your presence, to hear your Word, to listen and to learn, to be judged and to offer our prayers of love.

We know that not everyone hears Jesus' gospel with a glad and open heart. In his day, many walked away sorrowful, maybe even angry—and people still do that today.

Therefore, in your grace, we pray that we accept him as he really is, not as we would have him be. After all, that is what he does for us—accepts us as we are, where we are, how we are at any given moment. He accepts us. May we listen to the gospel with open ears and hungry hearts, accepting the challenges and also the strength you offer us to obey.

This we pray in the name of our Christ, whose very present, demanding, empowering love builds the church and sustains us all our lives. Amen.

RESOURCES:

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