

Calvary Presbyterian Church  
January 24, 2010  
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Jeremiah 1:4-10  
Luke 4:14-30

Our Epiphany story for this morning is from Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that immediately following his baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After those forty days in the wilderness, Jesus begins his public ministry by preaching in the synagogue.

While it is clear that this narrative does not describe the very first time that Jesus has been asked to preach—he comes with a reputation for his previous work—in Luke's gospel this day clearly marks the beginning of his public preaching and sets the agenda for his ministry. Jesus has come back home to Galilee—back to his hometown of Nazareth--back to the synagogue where he first worshiped God—back to the people who knew him as a child. The preparation is over, it is time to begin.

The lectionary divides this story in half, with the account of Jesus' preaching one week, and the congregation's response the next. But the story is a seamless whole and we need to hear it all. Luke 4: 14-30.

### Gracious Words?

I spent the day with Christian Smith yesterday. Dr. Smith is a sociologist from Notre Dame who is in the midst of a 13 year long study on the spiritual lives of young Americans.<sup>1</sup> He started with random interviews with over 3,000 teens and their parents in 2000; and the latest round was in 08 with young twenties. I thought his findings were very bad news for the church. Young people do not find religion to be a threatening topic, because they just don't find it interesting enough to talk about. They aren't hostile to the church, just indifferent. They think of the church as an elementary school for teaching morals and good behavior. They've been there, done that, and they can't see any reason why they should go to church—and don't understand at all why you still do it. I actually think I already knew that.

But what I found terrifying was that his research seems to say that young people believe that because that is what they have learned from us. Those faithful disciples, like the ones who started this church in the 50's, turned over the teaching ministry of the church to "professionals," and ceased to feel the responsibility to teach their own children. They counted on the pastor to teach the confirmation class and youth directors to lead youth groups and someone more qualified to teach Sunday School. Everyone around them was a very similar Christian, the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching* (Oxford Press, 2005) and *Souls in Transition* (Oxford press 2009)

children went to church, so what was there to talk about? Then the baby boomers wanted their children to be free to choose their own religious path, but they never described what the options were or showed a preference of their own, so their kids have no idea why we have made this choice to gather to worship on Sunday mornings and lament why there are so few young people among us. The recent generations of American Christians have been so reluctant to talk about our own faith, that our children never heard us say what we believe or why. My father often talked “church,” but I don’t remember him ever talking about his own faith. If we don’t know how to talk about it in our homes—or don’t find it interesting enough to talk about—how are we ever going to follow Christ’s command to “go and make disciples”? No wonder the evangelism word terrifies us. We want others to find their way to church, but we don’t want to be the ones to bring up the subject. We want someone else to do it. Frankly, we want God to do it; to move in the hearts of people we don’t know yet and just deposit them on our doorstep.

God had been planting seeds of change in his people for a very long time before Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth that day to read the scripture. This is actually the only time we have any evidence that Jesus could read. And he did a great job—I can just see all those men nodding their approval. What gracious words! That Joseph’s boy, I knew he’d make good. The passage Jesus reads is from near the end of the book of the prophet Isaiah. (It includes lines from at least two different places, from a group of poems promising that some day there would be the restoration of all the glory that was nostalgically remembered about Jerusalem.) We believe that by Jesus’ time there was a regular lectionary for reading the law, the Torah, but it is less clear whether there was also a prescribed schedule for reading the prophets. Whether Jesus actually chose this passage, or whether it was the lectionary for the day, is probably not very important. I am regularly amazed at how incredibly appropriate our own lectionary passages for a particular Sunday can be—and it might have been Jesus’ experience as well. However it happens, the passage he reads describes exactly what Jesus will do in the rest of Luke’s gospel. They are truly gracious words. Literally, the Greek says, “words of Grace.” The poor will get good news, the captives will be freed, and the blind will see. A beautiful picture of how the world ought to be. A wonderful vision of how it will be in God’s time.

But then Jesus sits down. He sits because he is finished reading, but he doesn’t sit because he is finished. Any time Jesus sits down in the gospels, he is about to say something important. He has assumed the traditional posture of a Jewish rabbi ready to preach. And he does. And the message is, “**Today**,” not someday, not wishful hoping, but this day, the promises that he has just read have “been fulfilled.” **This** marks the year of the Lord’s favor, **this** is the day for the poor and the captives and the blind. The spirit of the Lord was upon him, in that very place, that very day. Not on Isaiah from the olden times or some reincarnation of Elijah in the far distant future, but on Joseph’s son, Jesus, here in his own hometown of Nazareth. How can that be? How could those people of Nazareth believe that that scripture could possibly mean Jesus, the kid that they had known all his life? And looking around their world, how could they possibly believe, **Today**? Jesus was calling them to be something they did not envision for themselves. They could envision peace and justice someday, but they couldn’t hear the call to enter into the hard work of making it happen that day.

Abruptly, they can no longer hear anything gracious about what he has to say. Abruptly, Jesus begins to quote familiar proverbs; “Doctor, why don’t you cure yourself.” “No prophet is

acceptable in his own hometown.” It’s not clear what happens, but we can feel the attitude of the room shift from warm enthusiasm to hostility in the empty space between two verses. They are not just hostile, but so filled with rage that the congregation becomes a mob and intends to kill him. (Somehow throwing him at the stones at the bottom of a cliff could adequately substitute for the prescribed method of public execution, which would have been to throw the stones at him).

Maybe the complete transformation of the congregation in that moment is not from what actually happened, but from what didn’t happen, from what the crowd expected to happen. “Do what you did in Capernaum.” they shout. While Luke hasn’t told us yet what Jesus did in Capernaum, as folk who have heard this story before, we know that what he did in Capernaum was to heal the sick and cast out demons. Matthew tells us that Jesus **did** no “deeds of power” in Nazareth because of the people’s unbelief. Mark goes so far as to say he **could** do no “deeds of power” there and was amazed at their unbelief. Here in Luke’s account, Jesus reminds them of two examples from their own history of what Hebrew prophets had done, not in their own country, but in a foreign place, not for one of their own people, but for foreigners who didn’t know God at all. Examples to remind the hometown crowd that God is not bound to them exclusively. How can it be that the words of Grace that he has just read from their scriptures are not for them? The same Greek word, “*patris*,” that is translated as “hometown” in this passage will later be translated as his “country” or even as his “own people.” Just as the scripture, which he had read on this day, outlined exactly what Jesus was called to do, the response of the hometown folks foreshadows exactly how Jesus’ would be rejected by his larger “*patris*,” and be put to death on a cross in Jerusalem. On both levels, the people, who should know him best, can’t hear his message, so it must be told to others.

I don’t know about you, but I have always been essentially unqualified for the most important things I found myself called to do in life. I’ve told you before that I had no idea what to do with that two-day-old baby they allowed us to take home from the hospital. They let us take her away in a convertible with the top down, and no car seat! I still can’t believe I actually taught that 15-year-old boy to drive—here, in the traffic on the beltway. By the time I enrolled in seminary, I’d been a teacher for a long time, so the idea of standing up and sharing some of the things that I saw in the scriptures didn’t seem too daunting. I thought I could manage some gracious words. I wasn’t too worried that anyone would be throwing stones. (Even though I did begin my public ministry at the Meeting House with that text from Luke that says, “Woe to you who are rich.” Fortunately we don’t have to go there this year.)

But then I went to my theology class and we began to talk about Karl Barth and work through all the meanings and implications of the phrase, the Word of God. We thought about how God makes himself known in the world. We began with creation itself, which God spoke into existence. And then with Jesus as the enfleshed expression of the voice of God, and went on to the Scriptures as God’s word as it witnesses to that Incarnate Word. I was OK that far. But then, this Methodist theologian insisted that the preaching about the Word from the word was indeed another form of the Word of God. And I was terrified. I thought, “O surely they won’t take me that seriously. O surely not.” No one should be given that kind of responsibility. I want you to laugh a little and hear a little something new as I try to share something of what I see in that

written word that tells us more about that living Word, but please Lord, don't let me or anyone here think that my words might be the sound of God's voice speaking.

You know, that dismay and unwillingness is the standard response of every one in the Bible who hears a call from God. Moses, even given the amazing pyrotechnics of that burning bush, still says, O no, God, not me, you've surely made a mistake. I don't have the time. I don't have the basic skills. I don't know how to do this task. Calling people to follow you is not for me.

This morning we read the account of Jeremiah's call (Jer 1:4-10). God sent him to a hard audience with an even harder message—one about plucking up and pulling down; destroying and overthrowing. And Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid, he can't be expected to take on that responsibility. But God says to him, "Don't be afraid. I've called you. I will put the words in your mouth." Once I have heard that story, and all the others like it throughout the Bible, why is it still so hard for me to believe that God might also be willing to trust his word to a gray-haired grandmother in Virginia? God keeps taking fallible, unqualified human beings—like you and like me—into his service, and asks us to speak for him; to bring his word to people who might not have heard it yet.

I believe that all of us are called by God to participate in the work of Jesus Christ. God calls us in different ways to different tasks. As I look around this congregation, I already know so many of you are actively engaged in the work of the kingdom in a wide variety of ways. We're ready to tutor children or teach English or send aid to Haiti, but evangelism is beyond the realm of what we are willing to do. We rarely talk about our faith outside of a Sunday School class. But discipleship is about inviting others into the family of faith—it's the task that the Risen Christ calls each one of us to—go, make disciples (Matt 28:19). Don't hide your light under a bushel—stick it up on a lamp stand so that everyone around you may know that you have found life—light and forgiveness and joy beyond measure in following Jesus.

Those people of Nazareth couldn't accept that God might be speaking to them in a voice they knew too well. In their eyes, Jesus was only a local boy. They expected to hear God speaking in the voice of ancient prophets, and perhaps venerable elders, not of someone so familiar to them. If this passage was Jesus' agenda, and if we claim to be disciples—or follower of his, then this has to be our agenda too. If we believe that God poured out this Spirit on all of us on that first Pentecost, it means that we have been anointed in our baptism to follow Jesus' example and offer good news to the poor, help captives of all sorts to imagine release, and to make it possible for those who are blind to see the light of Christ, to announce that this is the year of God's favor!

Words of Grace. A mission statement clearly lined out for us already. I've been called. And so have you. Have courage. You too can find words of Grace to share with those who need to hear them. Do not be afraid. You are not too young. You are not too old. You are not unqualified. And, God has promised to be with you.