

Year C Epiphany 4 Luke 4 21-30

This story is not counted as one of the miracle stories in the gospels but, perhaps it should be. Jesus has been cornered against the edge of a cliff by his hometown neighbours but he simply, “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” This sentence gladdens my heart and wounds my heart at the same time. Even as I am relieved that Jesus escapes this murderous crowd, I am reminded of another one...the murderous crowd at the Garden of Gethsemane. Only this time, Jesus does not pass through them and go on his way. Jesus allows himself to be arrested which, of course, leads to his horrific torture and death for my sake, for your sake, for the sake of the world. We see the worst of humanity and a loving God who saves us anyway.

These two murderous crowds drive home an important message for us. Jesus walked the earth with a single-minded purpose – he came to redeem the world, to reconcile all things to God through himself, doing whatever that takes. Last week, we heard the blueprint for his life of baptismal fulfillment. He is anointed with the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells us, anointed with the Spirit to bring sight to the blind, release to the captives, to free all those sitting in the darkness of humanity’s willfulness. As God’s anointed ones, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we discovered last week that those words of Jesus are now our words today – that blueprint for a life of baptismal fulfillment is the blueprint for our lives. The story we hear today – Jesus’ rejection in his hometown synagogue – tells us that this is a life that is ours but it is not an easy life.

Chopping up Luke’s Gospel into small bits, that we hear during our worship services, deprives us of the brilliance of Luke’s story telling. This story of Jesus’ return to his hometown follows on the heels of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. Jesus is

tempted with self-gratification, he is tempted with worldly glory, and Jesus is tempted with self-glorification, of testing God to demonstrate his own self-worth. These temptations are placed before him by the prince of worldly power – the devil...the deceiver who convinces humanity that they are more important than God, that they deserve human accolades, and that their gratification tops the “to do” list of life.

Jesus does not succumb to any of these temptations and, instead, travels to his hometown to deliver the blueprint that is a remedy to the sickness of life lived under the corrupting thumb of the world’s idea of power and glory and freedom.

His words were surely met with rejoicing by those who were the victims of a life lived according to the world’s ways for the world’s ways necessitate the presence of victims – those cast aside by the dominant culture, those marginalized by the dominant religion, those unable to accumulate the wealth that others do, and the world itself, unable to defend itself against the exploitive greed of huge corporations and a society that functions by using up the world’s treasures...The ways of the world must always produce victims.

But Jesus’ words were also met with anger. His words fell on the ears of those who had succumbed to the world’s temptations that he had recently battled against and rejected. His words ran up against the wall of privilege enjoyed by those prospering in the lives they were living according to the ways of the world.

It is interesting to note that, in the synagogue that day, *all* of the people were – at first – welcoming Jesus’ words. Jesus was clearly full of grace and wisdom. But then, something changed and *all* of the people turned against him. Why is that?

“Jesus references the widow at Zarephath and the leper Naaman, the Syrian, revealing for whom it is he has come — the widows, the lepers, the outsiders. Jesus’ whole ministry will be for the least of these, over and over again. [And more than that,] Jesus is for everyone. Both Elijah and Elisha take God into places where God was not thought to be and had no business being. It is these words of inclusion, Jesus’ own interpretation of his ministry, the real reason for God in a manger, that [causes the] very quick transition from awe to rage for the hearers of Jesus’ words. Why?” (Karoline Lewis at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). The rage did not stem from the fact that Jesus was telling his Jewish listeners that Gentiles were going to be saved. It was not about who were to be included. Their anger was about who was being excluded. It was them...Not because they were Jewish and didn’t want to share their God with the Gentiles. Luke is not being antisemitic – Jesus was a Jew. Jesus had already been preaching, healing, teaching, saving his Jewish brothers and sisters all over Galilee. But, Jesus knows this crowd is going to reject him and he beats them to the punch and rejects them. What is going on with that?

Jesus calls himself a prophet and this isn’t the only time in Luke’s gospel that Jesus and others will equate the Messiah with a prophet. Remembering the role of the Old Testament prophets is important for this passage. Prophecy is not about predicting the future”, (Karoline Lewis at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)) except in the sense that prophets tell us that the future is secure in God.

Rather, prophets tell the truth about the present reality and give hope to all who need hope – God is present, God is working toward the fulfillment of his promises. “Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth is a prophetic message. Jesus tells the truth about the realities of our world, where the lowly are looked down upon, where the poor sleep in [the sheltered doorways of store entrances], where the captives remain in their

prisons, where the rich live exceedingly [pampered] lives” (Karoline Lewis at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). But today Jesus announces that God’s favour is upon us, upon all of us, here and now. “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus says.

Jesus is speaking truth to a crowd who does not want to hear it. These people before him are enmeshed in the ways of the world, profiting from the ways of the world, and so comfortable with the state of affairs that they don’t want to give up the ways of the world. They believe that, because Jesus is their hometown sweetheart, he is going to favour them simply because of that fact. They don’t need to change. They’re entitled.

Jesus enrages them by telling them he does not play that game. He will not indulge their sense of entitlement with any healings and other wonders as he has done elsewhere in the countryside. Jesus tries to shake his listeners out of their complacent privileged mindset by retelling well known stories of the inclusivity of God. And he tells them these things knowing that he is risking his life.

“This is no therapeutic Jesus who pats little children on the head. This is a bold antagonist who makes pre-emptive strikes against the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Roman rulers, the priests and scribes, the Conservatives and the Liberals, Socialists and Capitalists, and any other creature who presumes dibs upon the Divine” (Roy Harrisville III [altered somewhat], [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

Jesus uses Scripture – the words of God – to tell the people the good news of God’s purpose. It is a purpose that is a radical, turn-the-world-upside-down, shake-people-out-of-their-comfort-zones purpose. It is hard to hear the words of truth when that

truth does not line up with our lives. Jesus speaks a difficult to follow truth – not a truth that is a therapeutic-comforting-keep-things-as-they-are truth.

It is a difficult to follow truth that the Church began to fulfill at Pentecost so long ago. Unfortunately, across the centuries, the Church did fall into the trap – or into the habit – of leaving out the radical turn-the-world-upside-down part of the Gospel in order to provide the therapeutic, comforting, keep things as they are part of the Gospel. The Church can't say same-sex marriage is okay, people might leave. The Church can't switch prayer books, people might leave. The Church must keep people happy with the right service times, the right kind of music, the right way of doing things because we've always done them that way or people might leave – or cut back on their weekly offerings in protest.

We are just five weeks out from Christmas and, already, that momentous occasion feels like a distant memory. Each year we experience warmth and joy, humanity coming together to work all sorts of good in their communities and then, a mere five weeks out, things haven't really changed for the better at all. We are, as a whole, quite resistant to change because change is always contentious. Steve Aisthorpe, author of *Rewilding the Church*, has accompanied many church congregations through journeys of change and he has come to realize that "in many ways, 'change' is the easy bit. 'Transition', the psychological process people go through to come to terms with change, is the difficult part. For most people, change is perceived as a loss before it is experienced as a gain. We cannot, therefore, initiate a process of change without creating a grief reaction in people – however irrational this may sometimes seem. Neuroscientists assure us that fear and excitement are exactly the same in terms of brain chemistry, but that is of little help to those caught up in the emotional whirlwinds that can be roused by changes to our familiar environment"

(Aisthorpe p.11-12). The Church, though, before the pandemic and even more especially now during the pandemic, is undergoing change. Long-time church-goers are realizing that the Church is being the Church in many new ways, reaching out to people in new ways, caring for the vulnerable in new ways. This is an exciting opportunity to refresh and revive the Church and yet many people are longing for things to go back as close as possible to “normal” so that we can stop being the Church in these new ways and go back to being the Church in the old way.

But the Church is the Body of Christ and Christ, as we see today, boldly speaks the truth of radical good news and embraces change – the change that will draw society closer to the perfection of God’s kingdom. Jesus’ proclamation of a kingdom in which the poor inherit a kingdom, in which the hungry are filled, and in which the rich and full are pulled down ultimately leads him to the cross. We like the idea of the rising again in glory...not so much the being nailed to the cross. Yet that is precisely where we, as Christ in the world, are called to go – to the cross, rejecting the entitlement of having Jesus as our sweetheart and, instead, empowering the marginalized, the vulnerable, and those beyond the boundaries of our congregations, boldly proclaiming with Jesus, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Let the chips fall where they may as those words fall from our lips. It is time to be bold...lest Jesus pass through the midst of us and go on his way.