

“Prophet on the Edge”
Rev. Ruth Martz

January 31, 2016
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4: 14-30

If the town of Nazareth had a daily newspaper, the headline would probably read: “Hometown Boy Returns to Preach in Synagogue.” Most likely, a lot of people come to hear Jesus give the commentary on the Scripture reading of the day. According to the gospel of Luke, this visit is at the beginning of his ministry, right after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. But people have already heard good things about Jesus teaching in the synagogues, so they are eager to hear him. As Jesus begins to read the passage from the prophet Isaiah, I imagine heads nodding as people hear once again the promises of God that fill their hearts with hope and longing.

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.

With their eyes closed, people dream of a new future. Some may be thinking of a time when their neighbors in Judah will give the people of Nazareth the respect they deserve, rather than mocking them as ignorant country bumpkins. Most dream of a time when the oppressed people of Israel will be free from the Roman legions patrolling their streets, burdening them with taxes, imprisoning them unjustly. Oh to be free of all Gentiles, with their pagan beliefs, rituals and philosophies!

But then, suddenly, Jesus abruptly stops reading, rolls up the scroll and sits down! Wait, what happened to the rest of the sentence from the prophet Isaiah? People look at Jesus with puzzled stares. Luke writes: *The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.*

But Jesus only stuns them further by saying: *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

Wait, hold on just a minute; finish that last verse of Isaiah! *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 the day of vengeance of our God.* How can you have justice and power without the destruction of infidels and enemies? The Messiah is supposed to be the sword-wielding soldier cutting down the charging enemy! The Messiah is supposed to seek vengeance against all those who have blasphemed against the God of Israel and oppressed God's chosen people!

Jesus doesn't follow that script. Instead he says *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

It is unclear whether Jesus continues speaking words that we don't hear. Because what Luke writes next is that “people spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words. They said: Is not this Joseph's son?” (*admiring*). “Is not this Joseph's son?” (*sneering*).

These people seem to be impressed by this hometown boy, but there is also negative rumbling going on, to which Jesus soon responds. So what does the amazement of these people include--confusion, uneasiness, discomfort, disapproval, even sneering and indignation?

Jesus is basically announcing the mission of the Messiah to be that of carrying out the grace of God. The Anointed One will stand up for mercy and peace, not for destruction of the enemy. This isn't the Messiah that God promised them---and this Jesus certainly doesn't look the part! Sensing their resistance, Jesus makes it clear that he will not be giving preferential treatment to the people of Nazareth. He speaks the truth rather than trying to reassure them or win them over with false promises. Not a good politician!

Jesus goes on to remind them of two times in their own history where God extended mercy to outsiders, instead of God's own people. During a three year drought in Israel, the prophet Elijah was sent only to a poor widow in Gentile, that is, not Jewish, territory. And the prophet Elisha healed only one leper, Naaman the Syrian, an enemy military commander who traveled in despair to Israel to find healing!

I have just been blown away this past week by the fact that we are hearing this Scripture from the gospel of Luke in this particular election season and time of hot controversy about refugees and illegal aliens. I mean, a Jewish holy man traveling to help provide for a widow who represented everything that the people of Israel scorned and even despised? And Naaman the Syrian, crossing the border for medical care and being healed? Talk about a still-speaking, still-disrupting, extremely provoking God! It is impossible to separate Scripture from politics, economics and social issues.

Can't you just hear the whispering going on in that synagogue? "Who let Naaman into our country anyway?" And "This Jesus is a true prophet on the edge! Preach it, brother!" And "He couldn't be the One----could he?"

I keep thinking of two vivid news programs I saw on television when all those refugee children unexpectedly arrived in our country. One news bite showed angry protesters shouting hate-filled words and throwing things at a large group of these children. Another showed people from several local churches collecting and packing up boxes of clothes, food and toys to bring to the children who were staying in Border Patrol barracks in Artesia NM.

Jesus is about to embark on a mission of bringing God's grace to those who most desperately need it regardless of their nationality or religion, heritage or status. Sadly, it takes only a few minutes for the people in the synagogue to become so enraged that they drive him out of town and to the edge of a cliff.

Their rage seems way out of proportion, so it's worth taking a look at what the biblical proclamation of "the year of the Lord's favor" meant and still means. It is called the Jubilee, which is a concrete, material, economic act of redistributing property and money every fifty years. To let the oppressed go free is to cancel debts, and restore rightful property to the poor. Theologian Walter Brueggeman writes:"Jubilee is the most difficult, most outrageous

requirement of biblical faith.” Who wants to return to someone else what I have acquired, often through a lot of hard work?

There is no single recipe for how to enact Jubilee, but it is the gospel’s vision of God’s kingdom coming on earth, a community where the practices of justice and mercy, kindness and peaceableness are the order of the day. In Brueggeman’s words: “God wills and acts toward a neighborliness that curbs greed, vetoes fear and removes the causes of violence.”

So Jesus basically proclaims: *I am the Messiah who is going to enact the Jubilee*. And he sets out to give social power, access and goods to the poor and excluded, whether they are Jew or Gentile, friend or enemy. There were undoubtedly poor people in the synagogue that day who dreamed about such a Jubilee, but most probably didn’t like the idea of including non-Jewish people in the redistribution of wealth.

Even though through the prophet Isaiah God promises: *to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.*

This is the resistance that Jesus continues to face in his ministry, then---and to this day. He first calls the people of Israel and later all Christians to follow their ancient and original mission—to be a light to the whole world. But many want to reject outsiders and destroy their enemies, rather than trying to understand them, love them and work together toward peace. As people of faith, we continually struggle with Jesus’ radical message and call, in all our relationships—personal, national, international.

On the back of our bulletin this morning, there are words about risk-taking for the Realm of God, along with these questions. “What risks has your congregation, have your committees taken for the sake of the Gospel? What risk are you prepared to take?”

Let us remember the promise we heard God made when he called Jeremiah to speak God’s word to the nations. “Do not be afraid of those to whom I send you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord. Now I have put my words in your mouth.”

When Jesus proclaims what must be done to bring God’s kingdom on earth, it puts people on edge. Jesus finds himself suddenly surrounded by an angry mob of his former friends and maybe even family. Jesus finds himself on the edge of a cliff, literally pushed to the edge of his life.

And then what happens? Jesus *walked right through the midst of them and went on his way*.

If Nazareth had a daily paper, the headline the next day would probably read something like: “Angry Mob Drives Hometown Boy from Home.” And maybe, hopefully, even if it’s on the last page, there would also be mention of the faithful people who followed him and thereby found a new home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

RESOURCES

Brueggeman, Walter. *Inscribing the Text*. First Fortress Press (Minneapolis MN 2011), Chapter entitled “On Signal: Breaking the Vicious Cycles.” Quotes from pages 29-31 in Kindle edition.

Huey, Kate. *www.ucc.org*. “Weekly Seeds,” January 31, 2016: “Prophet on the Edge”

Merrill, Timothy, Ed. *www.homileticsonline.com*. Sermons on Luke 4: 14-30