

Sermon 1-31-2010
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-30
The Prophetic Life

When we arrive at the end of our gospel reading, it should come as a great shock to many. Here we have Jesus, the hometown boy from Nazareth, being driven to the top of cliff by a raging crowd where they plan to hurl him over the side. That's not exactly the happy, fairytale ending you would expect after hearing everything that preceded this event. Some of you might be thinking, "Why would they want to do something like that to such a meek and mild person? What would cause a crowd of worshippers to turn on someone they knew growing up; that they probably helped to raise in some way? Jesus didn't do anything wrong, gentle Jesus who loves the little children, why would this crowd of good-for-nothing idiots try and kill him?" While those all seem like reasonable questions to ask, a better question might be, what did Jesus do that got the synagogue-crowd all riled up?

Remember our passage from last week, when Jesus seized upon the opportunity for a little grandstanding in the midst of the synagogue. Remember how he took those few verses from Isaiah, verses that spoke about good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and the arrival of the year of the Lord's favor. And after reading from the scroll, Jesus proclaimed, as Rev. Purves so aptly put it, a one-line sermon saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In that moment, it was as if a lightning bolt had struck the synagogue, electrifying all who were there by the stunning good news that the centuries of waiting were over. For years, the people of Israel had been waiting upon the Lord, waiting for the time when God would drive out their Gentile rulers, establish justice and equity, and would place the Gentiles beneath the heel of Israel. This was especially true in a backwater town like Nazareth. People were waiting, and when

Jesus proclaims the fulfillment of the words from Isaiah in that moment, those gathered in that synagogue were sitting on the edge of their seat waiting in eager anticipation to hear what came next.

Gathered around Jesus, the people were amazed by the words coming from his mouth. They couldn't believe what they were hearing. They turned to one another asking, "Is this not Joseph's son." Jesus speaks like a prophet, he uses the words of one of the great prophets, and here he is proclaiming that the Spirit of God anoints him. I'm willing to bet they were thinking to themselves, "We watched this young man grow up and now he teaches in such a profound way." Surely those gathered in the synagogue began to assume that because of Jesus' declaration of fulfillment, Nazareth was going to play a new role in the vindication of God. Jesus will bless the people of Nazareth and God's ministry of vindication will begin in the armpit of the universe: no one will see it coming – especially those outsiders who surround them. And seeing the crowds' engagement in his teaching, their stunned expressions and amazement, Jesus takes another moment to teach his listeners by challenging the assumptions they are beginning to make.

Jesus begins by quoting a well-known proverb, basically saying to them, "You all will probably quote to me this, 'Doctor, make yourself better,' as well as say to me, 'Do here in your hometown, in the place that reared you, the things you did in Capernaum.'" In a brilliant move, Jesus has picked up on what the crowd is assuming about his ministry, about the glorious things God is about to do there; they think he's in Nazareth to work for them, to be a prophet in their midst and do great things there. But as Jesus continues, he tells them that they are sadly mistaken.

After dismantling the assumptions of those gathered in the synagogue, Jesus continues in his admonishment by emphasizing the lack of respect for a prophet within his own hometown. Why is Jesus taking this approach? Because he wants the crowd to understand that his mission and ministry are not directed at the Israelites alone, but includes the Gentiles, the outsiders as well. To emphasize this point, Jesus uses the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, both of which included ministries to Gentiles, as examples and as foreshadowing of his own. Contrary to what the people assume, God is at work within the whole world rather than being singularly focused upon Israel. The good news to the poor, the widow, and the captive is as much for those within Israel as it is for those outside, just as the precedent of Elijah and Elisha shows. After declaring this great gospel reality, the crowd is whipped into a rage. They went from hanging on every word of Jesus, assuming that he was there to work wonders in their midst, to a seething rage as they saw their assumptions broken.

For years, those gathered in the synagogue had heard the stories of God's work within the world. They had listened to the scriptures that witnessed to God's promises, like the Isaiah scroll, building assumptions about the ways God's story of salvation would be worked out in their midst. They were faithful people, but they allowed their assumptions to guide their faith so much so that when the Word of God enfleshed was standing among them, they could not hear it. As God spoke to his people in, through, and as Jesus Christ, assumptions and illusions were shattered by good news being proclaimed to them; God's salvation and redemption would be worked out on His terms rather than those assumptions in the synagogue (in the church). God's call and claim for their lives would be divinely driven in and through Christ in the power of the Spirit rather than by their own

decisions or strengths. Suffice it to say, the good news proclaimed by Jesus is jarring news, interrupting plans and designs in favor of God's ministry of salvation.

Hearing the call of God is never an easy thing; often it can be jarring and a little unsettling. Think of Jeremiah, whose call we heard earlier. At every point, Jeremiah tried to back out of it, tried to make excuses, tried to find any way possible to resist God's call and claim as God shattered assumptions to bring about his glory and wonder within the world. It wasn't easy for the people gathered in that synagogue in Nazareth, it wasn't easy for Jeremiah, and it certainly isn't any easier for a small church just north of Pittsburgh in a borough called Emsworth.

You know, one of the glorious things about being a small church is the fact that fellowship comes naturally. God-given relationships are forged, a lifetime of memories is shared, and, for many, years of participation in the life of a congregation plants deep and abiding roots. You can see this visibly in two different ways: the first being, any time we gather together to eat, and the second, and more important moment, is when we gather together in worship; especially when passing the peace. At the same time, this is our burden as well.

Have you ever walked in on someone else's family reunion? Or the first time you ever attended a family function with your in-laws? It's the same way for someone attending a small church for the first time. We are so good at fellowship, so good at attending to one another's needs, so good at bearing with one another as we are called to do by our Lord. We are good at forming such tight integral bonds that we lose sight of the community that surrounds us and the people who are in need of hope, of faith, of love, and seeing Jesus Christ for themselves. Our greatest burden as a church is the fact that we are so good at

being internally and integrally focused that we begin to build assumptions about God's work and God's ministry in our midst. When that happens, we can forget that there is a whole world out there that Jesus is already ministering within.

You know, that was the real rub when Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll, said the scripture was fulfilled, and then proceeded to let the people know that God's ministry was as much with the people in the synagogue as it was for those people outside. Jesus didn't spend his time with the religious folks; he hung out with those who were forgotten, who were let aside, who were lost and unsure of their place in the world. Jesus didn't hang on a cross between two rich men who were dying a good death; he hung between two insurrectionists – the bottom rung of society if you will. That was the rub: Jesus reminds us that we can't become complacent in our discipleship, we can't assume that he's only going to be at work in these small pockets called churches and nowhere else; the Holy Spirit isn't going to be working in the lives of those who always show up on a Sunday morning and live perfect lives. That's the challenge Jesus presents as the One who penetrated into the depths of a broken and weary world; He breaks our assumptions, reminds us who is Lord, and calls us out from beyond ourselves and beyond our walls to see God's glory around us and to bear witness to that glory when others are unable to see it, or hear it, or know it.

Now, we can be filled with wrath and anger, trying to run Jesus out of our lives, hurling him over the side of a cliff, or we can let go and trust in our Lord and Savior who has called us, who has claimed us, and who has commissioned us to be his people in this community; to bear witness to the good news of great joy that rests in Jesus Christ. As Rev. Purves said last week, our lives are our platforms; our lives are the places from which we can bear witness to God's work in the world, to the resurrected ministry of Jesus Christ –

where we can tell the stories of what life with God is all about. Our formation begins here, gathered around the Word of God as we hear of God's concern for the poor, the captive in sin, the weary, and the broken, but it compels us and sends us as a church to be thinking about the community out there; it compels us to discern where and with whom Jesus is already working in the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can be a part of it, rather than be a stumbling block to it. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.