

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, January 28, 2001

Focus: The Good News is we are called to proclaim the good news, release the captive and free the oppressed—not just in our own community, but to all children of God.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What in the world was going on in Nazareth that morning? Our Gospel is a continuation of last week's, so let's refresh our memories as to what scripture was fulfilled. Jesus was reading from Isaiah the same passage we heard last night in Vespers. "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."¹ Then, as we heard this morning, Jesus tells the people—his neighbors and kinfolk—that the scripture had been fulfilled. And his friends and neighbors were impressed. Jesus, the simple son of a carpenter, is such a nice young man, they say. He's done well—better than expected—in his studies as a young child and has paid attention in synagogue as an adult. Things are looking good.

Then, Jesus continues with his sermon. At this point, things begin to get a bit interesting. Jesus knows what is in the thoughts and hearts of the people, so he goes straight to the issue, and confronts the congregation. He knows that someone will demand that he perform miracles and healings. He also knows they really don't see Jesus as a prophet, let alone the Messiah, but just as a nice local boy who has grown up well. The people want Jesus to play "show and tell," but Jesus has other ideas. He quotes an old proverb about "prophets not being welcome in their own hometowns," and then goes on to talk about well-known events of the Hebrew Scriptures where prophets did things for foreigners and outsiders, but not for their own people.

As the people hear Jesus retell the stories of Elijah and Elisha aiding foreigners, the people are beginning to get nervous. Imagine what the scene must have looked like—the men, gathered near the front of the synagogue, shifting their weight from one foot to another, casting glances to their neighbor. The women, outside the room, but looking in, were whispering to one another, asking the one next to them what this is all about. The congregation must have been uncomfortable. They didn't like what they were hearing. "Why doesn't Jesus want to help us?" they ask. "Why does he care about the people in Capernaum? They are foreigners! They aren't like us!"

¹ Isaiah 61:1-2, 58:6 (NRSV)

No, my sisters and brothers, the people in Capernaum weren't like the people in Nazareth. They were different—not from the close-knit village of Nazareth. And, as Jesus spoke in the temple, the people of Nazareth were reminded that God—*their* God, the Creator and Covenant-maker—often sent prophets to foreign lands and foreign people to show the majesty, power, and grace of God. This angered the Nazarenes to no end.

Preaching is a dangerous activity. It is a task no pastor takes lightly, to be sure. When one is called to proclaim and interpret the Word of God, sometimes the listeners end up angry. Sometimes, the sermon makes the listener angry or uncomfortable. We certainly see that in the Gospel today. Jesus hit a nerve with his own people. Not only did Jesus remind his family and friends that God had frequently sent messengers and prophets to their enemies, but some times, it looked like God did so at the expense of the Israelites—God's chosen people! But remember, Jesus proclaimed that the words of Isaiah were fulfilled. The Good News was taken to the poor. The captives were released. The blind received sight. The oppressed went free.

The Nazarenes really weren't poor. They certainly didn't see themselves as captive, even though they were under Roman rule. None of them were blind, and they certainly weren't oppressed—overtaxed, maybe, but not oppressed. Yet they heard Jesus tell them the scripture was fulfilled. Fulfilled? How's that? For whom? To whom? Criminals? Physically disabled persons? Oppressed? Poor? "What about us?" they probably thought. "We're not only better off than all those folks, we're your own flesh and blood, Jesus, son of Joseph!"

And indeed, what about them? Why shouldn't they receive the same benefits of Jesus' ministry as those strangers? It's not fair. It's simply not fair.

Does this make *you* angry? Do *you* feel challenged by today's Gospel and sermon? Should you feel challenged? What's really going on in Nazareth? For that matter, what's really going on here?

Isaiah spoke to the people of a time when the Spirit of the Lord would be upon all those in need. Jesus, sitting before his hometown crowd, announced that that time had come. This event is at the start of Jesus' ministry. It sets the tone for all of the events to follow. From the outset, we see and hear that Jesus is living, working, eating, and worshiping among the marginalized in society. Jesus gathers with people who are not like him, nor are they like the people with whom he grew up. This makes the folks at home uncomfortable. It makes the Pharisees and scribes and leaders of the Judean community uncomfortable. But that didn't stop Jesus from his ministry. He continued to reach out

to those who were on the margins of society, and in the process, gained followers from all parts of society. Isn't it amazing what the Good News can do?

In our own community, right here in Beltsville, there are people who don't look like us, act like us, or talk like us. There are families who will spend this day—and almost every day—hungry, cold, or homeless. There are men and women who will face challenges that we cannot imagine—deteriorating physical health, mental illness, addiction, illiteracy, language barriers. There are teens who will be incarcerated and teens who will become victims. There are young children without a place to go after school for a safe place to play or do homework while they wait for their parents—or, too often, a parent—to return home after a long day at work. Dear sisters and brothers, these are the people to whom Jesus was speaking. Many of these people don't look or sound a thing like us—some are foreigners in a strange land. But, my dear friends, many of them do look and sound just like us. What's going on in Beltsville?

My friends, in our baptism, we are all made children of God, and brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called, as we are reminded in the 28th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them—making them *our* brothers and sisters as well. We are reminded in the baptismal liturgy to “let [our] light shine before others so they may...glorify [our] Father in heaven.”² Being a Christian isn't easy! It means being uncomfortable, even when we are comfortable. It means taking the example of Jesus to heart and seeking out ways in which *we* can bring good news to the poor. It means seeking out ways in which *we* can proclaim release to the captives and how *we* can let the oppressed go free. It means, my dear friends, that we need to let the light of Christ shine through us by our actions.

We are also poor, captive, and oppressed. We are poor in Spirit, for we can never be too filled with the Spirit of the Lord. We are captive to human nature—the Old Adam and the Old Eve in us—that thankfully is drowned in our baptism when we are reborn into the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are oppressed by sin—the sin which we know and the sin which is known only to God—but we are reminded each time we come to this Table and share in the bread and the wine—the Body and Blood of Christ—that these are given and shed for you and for you and for each of us for the forgiveness of sin as a visible sign of the grace of God. Freely given by God and wholly undeserved by you and me.

What's going on in Nazareth? A lot of anger and misunderstanding, I'm sure. They were hearing a message from Jesus that they weren't quite ready to hear. But in the end, rather

² *LBW*, 124.

than tossing Jesus down the hillside, they let him pass through their midst and continue on with his ministry. Some of them undoubtedly joined those who followed him, and others undoubtedly did not. Some heard the words of Jesus and, after a time, possibly looked for ways to reach out to the stranger and share the Good News. The message that was proclaimed in Nazareth is just as necessary today as it was some two thousand years ago. And that message made the good people of Nazareth uneasy. It probably makes the good people of Beltsville uneasy, too. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, and has anointed us, too. Go, proclaim the Good News to the poor, release the captives, set the oppressed free. Amen!