

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God our help in ages past and help for years to come, we lift up your goodness and your love throughout our lives. We seek you always, wanting to follow the path of faithfulness. You promised us life, and we earnestly desire to pursue true life, to journey to find what life means, to hold it close, and to never let it go. Let us find it where it presents itself, for we find the Gospel in word and where it is needed throughout our lives.

Sometimes the Gospel is hard, God. It can call us into difficult situations when we just don't want to go! We sometimes hear about it where we don't expect and don't want to hear about it. We remember and love the Gospel of Christ, but sometimes it says something that jars us, that brings us out of our complacency. Sometimes we hear a truth we don't necessarily want to hear, and that is uncomfortable. Jesus said so many things that caused an uproar in his time, and we often still debate about his words today. He was an unexpected messenger in a town that thought they knew him well. Sometimes we think we know it well when we need a refresher. Fill us with the spirit to faithfully discern what Jesus is speaking to us today. Let us hear the words of Christ wherever they turn up in a way that fills us with Christ's love and goodness while challenging us to live more and more into his message. May it all be so, in the name of our key example, companion, and challenger for all time, Jesus the Prophet and the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Oatmeal raisin cookies are for the experienced in age. Peyton Manning always plays horrible in cold weather. Macs are better than PCs. Life is full of preconceived notions. It's easy to see one or two things and make them into a set of meanings. The book Goldfinger by Ian Fleming says, "Once is Happenstance, Twice is Coincidence, Three times is enemy

action.” Sometimes that’s true, sometimes it is more of what we make it out to be. But preconceived notions don’t always tell the whole picture.

Yes, it’s easy to be stuck in our preconceived notions. Think about the church. We come into these halls thinking that this is the place where God speaks. Sometimes it is. Many people do have meaningful moments during worship. Other times, it is not. Some better hear God outside these walls. We can hear the voice of God other places, from a friend who says the right thing at the right time when you needed it, a commentator on TV who says something that you now is true but is uncomfortable, the person who gives you unwelcome but, at the same time, right-on-the-dot constructive criticism. The church does not have the market on being the exclusive place where we find God and God finds us. Our God and God’s Word are much bigger than that. God’s word and the word of God can come when we have no idea it will come, like a two-by-four, often from places that we do not expect. Those places can often be in the most familiar of places with the most familiar of people. Time to drop the preconceived notions when truth presents itself.

When Jesus speaks, results happen. Sometimes, he gives you something that you know is meaningful but you need to chew on for a while for it all to set in. Sometimes he hits you over your head with pure truth. Sometimes, he says something that gets you a bit uncomfortable. This passage just might take in all three of these. Jesus is quoting scripture when he comes to the Synagogue on the day of worship, then he ends it with a dramatic statement which, spoiler alert, sends it all in an uproar. What was he saying here and why does it make such a mess?

I think this scripture and Jesus’ response are worth wrestling with, for it sets the tone for the rest of Luke’s Gospel. This could be the Gospel’s thesis statement. A thesis

statement, if you aren't familiar, is a sentence in a paper, for instance, that lays out the argument that is presented further in the paper. It is the grand statement the rest of the paper intends to fulfill. And boy, is Jesus making a grand statement, a thesis, about what it means to be the saving force in the world. The grand vision that Isaiah gives to the people is fulfilled in their listening by Jesus. Each one of the statements is important to hear, for they say something about the Gospel that Jesus comes to live. Let's look at what he says.

So the scripture begins easily enough: Jesus comes home to Nazareth. He does what any good guy does when he comes home: he goes to his church, and he gets pulled into doing a part in the worship service, scripture reading. So he gets up there reads from the Prophet Isaiah's writings. He reads it with authority then he takes his seat. You know he did it well while everyone is still watching when he is done and sits. He doesn't sum it up easily or formulaically. It's not a simple, "The word of God for the People of God." He does something unexpected and shocking. He speaks into the scriptures: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is not a distant picture, but a true reality, and this catches everyone off guard.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon him, says the text, but Jesus is not just reading. He is proclaiming his calling and intention to fulfill it. We saw last week that Jesus was out in the wilderness; the wilderness taught him how to receive his call. Now it's time to go to work with ministry. God has a way, and this passage is showing us what God's plans are. Jesus reads Isaiah, and Isaiah's text had an intention. At the time, Isaiah was speaking about the restoration of Israel from exile, says the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. That had been done several hundred years before. Now, Jesus' restoration of Israel has a different tone, as he has come for a new ministry and claims this ancient text as his own.

Jesus says that God has “Anointed me to bring good news to the poor,” and that sets the tone for the other images. “Release for the captives,” “let the oppressed go free.” Jesus is speaking about the seemingly distant but now present Kingdom of God. The most resounding image, though, is “recovery of sight to the blind,” for that speaks at so many levels. Jesus is speaking literally, for he cures blindness several times in the Gospel, but he is also speaking figuratively. According to the Texts for Preaching commentary, Jesus is calling out the spiritually blind, those who haven’t heard the message. Jesus comes to spread the message of the Gospel, this message of the coming of the Kingdom of God to all. Jesus is calling out the blind that thought they see but do not. Saul, who later becomes the Apostle Paul is one of these people. He thought he knew the truth, but later found that the Jesus he was persecuting was the one he should be following instead. Jesus is calling out the blind who absolutely refuse to see what is going on. These don’t want to hear the Gospel but want to be left comfortable and at ease. Jesus reminds them rather roughly that the Gospel isn’t about being comfortable and at ease; it requires stretching, growing, changing for our neighbor and our God. It turns the scales toward those who are poor, those who are caught in bondage, those who need more than have.

Indeed, these texts are about release from bondage. This world carries a lot of bondage, often difficult to see and hard to hear about. Any time you see the poor, you see bondage. Bondage can be subtle. Bondage can be outright, but as Christians, we are called to alleviate suffering and destroy all those things that cause suffering. Jesus speaks clearly about what is to come in his ministry, but he also speaks figuratively about what is to come throughout the ages. We discussed the Kingdom of God earlier. It is not a Kingdom that

comes by force or all at once; it comes slowly and through different means. Our actions can either further the Kingdom or it can prevent it from coming.

Next week, we will hear the rest of the story, the peoples' response to Jesus' new message and the pushback it causes. What angers the people the most is that this is a new message from a familiar person. This is not just a new message reinterpreted from an old passage that angers them. They are hearing this new message from someone they thought they new. "A prophet is never accepted in his hometown," says the proverb, and with good truth. They think they knew everything about Jesus in Nazareth because that's where he grew up. Maybe, but not totally. The New Interpreter's Bible says what confused them was their preconceived notions. This was the Son of Joseph, they said. Partially right. This is also the Son of God. When your mind is on one, then you can't see the other.

These lessons are not easy to hear. Jesus's thesis requires a tough argument to achieve. Last week, we discussed how Jesus was sent into the wilderness by the Spirit to become who he was meant to be, in title and in how he uses his power. Now he claims all the authority that goes with it. That kind of power is scary for a lot of people, especially when these people just want to hear Isaiah with an uplifting message. They don't want a grand statement; they only want to be comfortable. They don't want the Kingdom that Jesus speaks of, but Jesus says it's already here. What would it mean if all these statements were true? Jesus comes to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to give sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor?

When I was younger, I went home from school every day to watch the 1960's Batman TV show. It was always in two parts. This scripture is only the first part of a bigger story. We hear the declaration of Jesus, but then the backlash happens in part 2, which you

will hear next week. Same Bat time, same Bat network. Jesus here set the agenda for his ministry to come. This ministry was often joyful, but it also was very divisive. Jesus' ministry was one of goodness and love, but it also set the comfortable on edge. Remember Simeon at the baptism of Jesus? He said very clearly, in Luke 2:34 and 35: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed..." Indeed, this is a theme throughout Luke. Today, let us dwell on Jesus and the message and learn something from what we know will come. It is often best to let the message seep in, to take a good taste of it and dwell on it before we react. The people of Nazareth did not do that, and they mistook a true prophet, indeed, the Son of God, for just another kid that grew up in that town. Let us look before we leap, let us look to hear the word of God where we least expect it, for that is often where it shows up. Amen and Amen.