

4th Sabbath in Epiphany
January 29/31, 2010
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PASSING THROUGH THE MIDST

Luke 4:21-30

Series: *This We Believe*

Our text for today occurs at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee following his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist and his temptation in the wilderness by Satan. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. People were excited by his teaching and ministry. I find it a bit ironic, even coincidental, that this reading for the fourth Sabbath after Epiphany occurs on this particular day—my first time in the pulpit after announcing my retirement. I'm at the end of my ministry, at least, officially. Jesus was at the beginning of his ministry.

I remember the beginning of my ministry. It was so exciting! Seminary was completed at SMU. My ordination took place at the annual conference in First UMC, Ft. Smith, by Arkansas Bishop Paul V. Galloway, assisted unexpectedly by my grandfather, Hubert H. Nixon. Freddie, Aubrey and I were soon on our way to my first appointment as associate pastor at Central Church, Fayetteville, where Bob Sells was on the Staff/Parish Relations Committee. Some of you might not consider that a blessing, but it was. Bob and Georgia were members of Central Church at the beginning of my ministry and became good friends. They are

members of this church and remain good friends at the end of my ministry. And believe it or not, Georgia is on our Staff/Parish Relations Committee. Bob is the Church Treasurer. On second thought, maybe I should warn my successor!

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Jesus had just returned to his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee where he attended church on the Sabbath “as was his custom,” says Luke, and served as the reader in worship, that wonderful text from Isaiah 61:

*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. (Luke 4:18-19)

He concluded by saying to the church: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The first recorded word of Jesus’ public ministry in Luke’s Gospel is the word “today.”(1) *Today*, Jesus said, this scripture has come true. The kingdom of God is present *today*. God’s promises are fulfilled *today*. Not tomorrow. Not someday. Jesus’ first word to the Nazareth congregation, and to us, is *today*.

Today, God loves and accepts you.
Today, you can receive forgiveness.
Today, you can begin life anew.
Today, the world can be different.
Today, Christ can enter your life.
Not yesterday. Not someday. Today!

There were smiles and nods of approval among the hometown folks who heard Jesus proclaim that faith is more than a memory, that God is active in our midst right now, and Jesus—true to his prophetic heritage—intended to fulfill Isaiah’s promise.

As always, there were skeptics. Isn’t that Joseph’s boy? I thought he was in the carpentry business with his dad. He was a difficult lad in Sunday School, always asking hard questions. I hear he’s been stirring up folks in Capernaum.

Recognizing the negative turn in the conversation Jesus quoted two proverbs: “Doctor, cure yourself” and “No prophet is acceptable in his hometown,” indicating that familiarity was blinding folks to his ministry. The plain truth is that they resented pronouncing God’s favor for outsiders over in Capernaum.

In defense of his ministry, Jesus recalled two familiar stories about prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures. The first was about Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-14). Early in his ministry Elijah was on the run from King Ahab, worshipper of Ba'al, a fertility god. Ahab had threatened to kill Elijah. According to Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar and former Raney Preacher, a prophet's job is to offer critical analysis of religious truth claims and the negative impact of government upon the quality of life.(2) Elijah had told Ahab that if he didn't get his theology straightened out he was in for a long dry spell. Sure enough, famine set in throughout the land. With Ahab in hot pursuit, Elijah skipped out of Israel over to Zarephath in Sidon (present-day Lebanon).

There, at the town gate, he met a widow gathering sticks. He asked, "Could you bring me a drink?" She consented and turned to get the water. Then Elijah said, "Oh, and while you're at it, I sure could use a bite to eat." She stopped, looked at him and replied, "There is nothing to eat. A handful of meal and some oil are all I have. I was gathering these sticks for a fire to cook them for me and my son—our last meal before we die." They were destitute.

Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go ahead and cook them. There will be plenty for all of us." She did as he asked and,

amazingly, there was enough. Furthermore, no matter how much was used each day, the meal and oil were always replenished because God looked after them.

Another thing that prophets do is energize people to move toward a new future where God is in control. This is a marvelous story of God's providential care for people in distress, people rejected by the powers that be and broken by circumstances in life. It's a story about sharing resources, however meager, that, by the grace of God, become sufficient. It's like donating for Haiti earthquake relief. When we share our resources generously, people are fed—physically, educationally, and spiritually.

There was just one thing wrong from the standpoint of Jesus' hearers in Nazareth First Church: the widow and her boy were not their kind. They didn't look like us, didn't speak the same language, didn't worship like we do. They were outsiders by nationality, language, and religion. Elijah had pronounced God's favor upon *them*! We all know who God's chosen people are!

When Jesus recalled this story the church folk got angry, just like people tend to do when told that their theology is a little bit narrow, that God can't be limited to their sanctuaries, doctrines and

practices, and amazingly God sometimes loves and works among non-believers. I call it a “theology of rejection,” a self-righteous sense of who is or isn’t fit to be a recipient of God’s grace.

Believe it or not, you can still find adherents of that same theology today. Most recently, TV evangelist Pat Robertson said the recent earthquake disaster in Haiti was due to a 19th century pact Haitians made with the devil! What a sick theology! I don’t believe earthquakes are caused by two-century old pacts. God loves Haiti and calls us to show some compassion and lend a helping hand.

The second story Jesus recalled for folks at First Church Nazareth, was about Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-17), Elijah’s successor as prophet in Israel. The Syrians and Israelites were at war (imagine!), and the Syrians were winning. Naaman, commander of the Syrian army, had leprosy. Leprosy, as described in the scriptures, included everything from the serious disfigurement of Hansen’s disease to zits on your face, and sufferers were considered unclean and excluded from the community.

On his last raid into Israel, Naaman had taken captives, one a Hebrew girl who became a servant to the general’s wife. The girl told her mistress about a prophet in Samaria who could cure her husband’s leprosy. When General Naaman heard this, he

immediately made arrangements with his king to write a letter of recommendation to the king of Israel. So, they called a truce and Naaman filled his Hummer with gold, silver and fine clothing and headed out for Israel. When he arrived the king read the letter, which had omitted reference to the prophet, asking that Naaman be cured of leprosy. The king got so angry that he tore his clothes and screamed, “Am I supposed to play God? Your king must be making fun of me!” It wasn’t the first time, unfortunately, nor the last, that politics got in the way of improved health care. (Ahem!)

Somehow Elisha heard about the fuss and sent word to the king to have General Naaman come by his house. So the general drove his treasure-filled chariot over to Elisha’s house, stopped out front and tooted his horn. Elisha sent a messenger to tell the general that he needed to take a bath in the Jordan River. Naaman was offended that Elisha would send a servant to address him and insinuate that he needed to clean up. “I could have washed in my own beautiful river,” he scowled. “I didn’t come all this way to be insulted!” In a huff he turned to leave. But a wise member of his staff advised him that he might as well try a dip in the Jordan since they had come all this way, couldn’t hurt, nothing to lose. Reason prevailed. Naaman was cured.

And converted. Very happy, the general went back to Elisha's house where he told the prophet that he now knew that the only true God was in Israel and gave all his treasure to Elisha. Elisha congratulated him on his new faith but refused the gifts. "Why?" Naaman asked. Elisha told him God's grace is free. Do you know what Naaman did? He took two wagonloads of dirt back to Syria believing that God literally dwelled in the soil of Israel. Some people still think it is the only "holy land" on earth.

From the perspective of First Church, Nazareth, there's a problem with this story: Naaman was an outsider with a socially and religiously unacceptable disease, a foreigner with leprosy. Not the kind of person we want around our kids. Not people we want inside the country or the church.

When Jesus reminded his hometown church that God loves such people, admits them to community and longs to make them whole, they were incensed! They drove him out of the church to the edge of town, intending to throw him off a high bluff. Thank God, it didn't happen. Instead, Luke says, Jesus "passed through the midst of them and went on his way."(4:30)

Christ still does that. Passes through our midst, comes into our lives and stretches our theology when we don't want it stretched because we like it just like it is, thank you very much. Passes through and confronts our prejudices and narrow mindedness, turns us from would be killers into kindred souls, who welcome all God's children to eat at our table. Christ continues on his way to enter other lives. We are never the same after this encounter. And we too must decide who this Jesus is and whether to follow him—today. *Today*.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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1. Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation* (John Know Press: Knoxville,
2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 12-13.
3. CNN, Jan. 13, 2010, 6:58 p.m. EST.