

Go Be Jesus

Luke 4:21-30

The setting of the scripture passage lends itself to one particular perspective for a preacher and a congregation. Jesus comes to his hometown synagogue, the one he grew up in, learned the scriptures in, went through Sabbath school. He gets up and reads the scripture passage from Isaiah, then begins to preach. His sermon starts out well, but goes downhill quickly...at least in the minds of his home-folk. They start out rooting for him. This is one of their own. This is Joseph and Mary's boy. They're proud – they want him to do well. Before he can get past the introduction, they're carrying him out and trying to throw him off a cliff.

It's a pretty natural jump simply to move the setting from Nazareth in AD 30 to High Point in AD 2010. We're in church, just like they were; I'm reading scripture and starting to preach, just like Jesus was; you're sitting there waiting to see if you need to call a congregational meeting and take a vote as to whether you're going to throw me off a cliff. After all, we're Presbyterians. We have to vote on everything.

But, what if that seemingly natural shift from synagogue to sanctuary...preacher to preacher...and, congregation to congregation is not the way we should take this? What if the parallel goes like this: I am not the contemporary parallel to Jesus. Rather, I am Luke, telling the story; you are Jesus, and your congregation is the world you enter when you leave this place, your family, your neighbors, your friends, your co-workers.

When I am Jesus and you are the people in the synagogue, the result is a sermon where I tell you something that's supposed to make you mad; where I say something about my job being to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and you all look pretty comfortable this morning, so I'm going to do some afflicting today.

But that's not why Luke puts this story into his gospel. Luke tells this story to the church of his day who is trying its best to be Jesus to the world, and his message is, if you really are trying to be Jesus out there in the neighborhood, in the voting booth, in the complexities of your family relationships, if you really try to be Jesus at work, at the grocery store, on the golf course, driving down Main Street, it's going to get you into hot water, because Jesus got into hot water, right from the start, in his hometown.

So, what is it Jesus says to make these people who have known him his whole life so angry? He begins by saying that God is fulfilling his promises to bring in a new day where the poor are set free from the chains of debt, the oppressed are freed from the weight of their oppression. A new era has begun; the kingdom of God has come near, and what everyone would have understood Jesus to be saying is, *"I am the Messiah whose coming will bring all of God's promises to fulfillment. The new order is about to begin!"*

And the people would naturally respond, "Yes! Bring it on, Jesus. You are our hometown hero, so naturally, you're going to start here. We will be the first to benefit, then the rest of Israel." They're thinking pork barrel politics when they say, "Doctor, cure yourself." That was a proverb from that day which basically means, "Charity begins at home." Help yourself first, then, help others. Do what you're going to do, Jesus, and start here. We will benefit the most. How lucky we are the Messiah is one of us!

But Jesus then throws cold water all over their me-first attitudes. He says, *"You know, back in Elijah's day during that huge drought, there were tons of widows starving right here in Israel, but, Elijah didn't help any of them – he helped a gentile widow from Zarephath. And back when Elisha was around, there were lots of hometown folk with leprosy, but, Elisha healed a gentile, a Syrian soldier named Naaman."*

The people get Jesus' drift. He is saying, "you people need to open up your horizons a little bit. Quit thinking only of yourselves. Quit thinking God only loves people who look like you. Start thinking of more than the people next door as your neighbors." Jesus begins his ministry in his hometown synagogue by saying, first, he is the long-awaited Messiah, and, second, he did not come only for the salvation of Israel.

There is an old rabbinical story about the day God divided the Red Sea, and all the people of Israel walked safely between the two walls of water to the other side, but when the Egyptian soldiers chased them, the walls of water crashed over them and they were destroyed. The old rabbi's story says, when that happened, the angels in heaven celebrated that the enemies of God's people were destroyed. But God ordered the angels to stop celebrating. God said, "Don't you understand that those Egyptian soldiers are my children, too?"

Luke tells this story to the church of his day, a church experiencing persecution. He tells the story to say, the persecution may not be a good *thing*, but it is a good *sign*, because it means you are being Jesus. Because if you stop being yourself and start being Jesus at home, at work, at the neighborhood homeowners' association meetings, sometimes even at church, people are going to get mad at you for telling them to stop putting themselves first.

So, go to your neighbors and be Jesus, and see where it gets you. Try telling them that everyone in the neighborhood doesn't have to look like them; tell them to quit thinking only of themselves. Tell them to quit thinking God only loves people who look like them. Tell them to start thinking of more than the people next door as their neighbors, because that is what Jesus is saying to his family and friends who have gathered in the synagogue. See if they don't start talking about throwing you off a cliff.

Are there people, or maybe just one person, at school that your friends like to make fun of? Be Jesus to your friends. Tell them they should accept that person, respect that person, and see how your friends respond.

Is there someone in your neighborhood everyone keeps at arm's length, or someone at work nobody likes because they're different? Be Jesus and accept those people. See how your neighbors or co-workers react.

Someone in the family everyone calls the black sheep?

New residents in the retirement community?

Be Jesus and accept that black sheep or those new residents. Chances are, like Jesus in this story, folks are not going to appreciate your words or actions.

But, there's one other thing Luke is telling you and me in this story. The people form a mob and head toward the cliff on the edge of town. Jesus is right there in the midst of them one minute; the next minute, they're standing around asking, "Where'd he go?" Does Luke just include that part because it is interesting, or does he see a message for us in Jesus' miraculous escape?

Maybe Luke is saying, when you go out there and start being Jesus, telling people they need to love people they'd rather hate, or at least look down on, and folks start forming a lynch mob, God will be with you. God will deliver you. God will strengthen you, and God will bless you.

Luke tells this story to the church under persecution to say that their suffering is because they're being Jesus. But he also tells the story to encourage the church; to say, just as God delivered Jesus from that crowd, you, too will find that God is with you and will carry you through the persecution you experience for being Jesus in your world.

So, re-think the parallel here. I'm not Jesus, here to make you mad, and you're not Jesus' lifelong friends who now want to throw me off a cliff. I'm just Luke, here to say, you go out there and be Jesus to everyone you meet in every situation you find yourself. Sometimes you're going to feel great because you helped someone, like Jesus helped people. And sometimes you're going to feel not-so-great because you just made your neighbors, your family, the people you relate to every day, mad enough to tar and feather you. Don't worry. God will be with you and will deliver you from evil...even the evil that sometimes shows itself in your closest friends.

Amen.