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SERMON

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God's Voice Shapes Us

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Dear God,

As we turn to your word, we admit that we hope your call will be easy and polite because the world around right now seems to spin too fast. We are afraid you will ask more of us than we can offer. Send us courage to be both humble and grateful for the message you have for us today. Amen.

While their son is only days old, Mary and Joseph dedicate Jesus in the temple. The old priest, Simeon, takes the infant into his arms and says to Mary, "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." (Lk 2:34-35)

Simeon's wisdom proves to be true then and is still true today.

Fast forward. Jesus matures and after the equivalent of a gap-year, with time in the desert and healing people of all manner of ailments in Capernaum, he returns home.

Jesus' inaugural sermon confirms what Simon and all those who raised him both predict and fear.

Since today's lectionary reading describes the aftermath of his sermon – I thought I would repeat portions of what we heard last week to remind us of what becomes so divisive.

Luke 4:14-21 (abbreviated)

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He read:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...

to proclaim release to the captives,

recovery of sight to the blind,

to set free those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll and sat down.

Listen for God's living word as I read the second portion of this inaugural event, given to us by today's common lectionary.

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and

were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

²³ He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.' "

²⁴ And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

²⁷ There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸ When they heard this, *all* in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Just as Simeon predicts, Jesus disrupts them.

As customary on the Sabbath, he goes to the synagogue, a practice that they likely taught him, and turns to sacred text to hear God's voice. He reads of God's call to tend the poor, widowed, and oppressed.

They might wonder, why? Sure, the widows and captives need him but their hometown boy needs to take care of them first. After generations of decline, the people of Nazareth expect him to make good on the promise of restoring their privilege, their authority, their autonomy, and their health first.

They question, "isn't this Joseph's boy?" Meaning, doesn't he owe us. That's the first clue this inaugural sermon will not lead to cookies and *highfive* congratulations in the Welcome Center. Jesus senses this and pokes them with what he learned from his youth and weaves together two stories that share some common threads.

Jesus tells of a time when Elijah listened to God's voice and lived with a widow in enemy territory. That widow proved to be faithful while many widows in Israel failed to trust God.

Another time and another prophet Elisha followed God's call to heal Naaman, a military leader of the Syrian army.

The congregation in Nazareth would have had a hard time deciding which was worse, being widowed or being from Sidon... being Syrian or being a leper.

Those who know the stories remember both prophets had been driven out of their Israelite homes for fear of death.

Both stories represent common themes throughout faith – God's care for all people. God cannot be claimed or confined or controlled. Too often we don't like that.

Suddenly the good news of Isaiah is not such good news personally for the chosen people of Nazareth.

Jesus also gives them another clue that he is not what they expect. He omits a simple phrase from Isaiah that includes vengeance in the name of God. When he gives the scroll back to the attendant, sits down, and tells the crowd that he fulfills the prophecy, it is as if Jesus closes the book on vengeance.

This wasn't what they want to hear about God. They want a *terminator* Messiah. Throughout their lives, they lived in culture that degenerated into high-stakes, zero sum game – for anyone to win, it comes at another's expense.

There is just not enough food, money, health, or freedom to go around, and the hometown folks are tired of losing. The image

of God they crafted took care of them first and was willing to destroy the infidels by whom they feel threatened.

We can imagine some of the crowd muttering about Jesus being too soft-hearted to sidestep the festering desire for “vengeance.”¹

Just as Simeon predicted, Jesus’ ministry provokes the people to reveal the contents of their hearts. They choose violence. Take him outside to throw him off the cliff.

Nazareth sits on a hill with the synagogue at the top of the village for this practical purpose. They knew – likely from practice – that if you threw a man the height of stories, he’d die.

Jesus foreshadows his ministry, his death, and his resurrection by the way he walks away – and will walk out of a tomb.

When burdened with a belief that I’ll need to fight for what’s rightfully mine, violence is the only way.

¹ William Joseph Adams, Epiphany 4 Year C, Gospel Talk, <https://sundaygospeltalk.com/wp/epiphany-4-yearc/#more-1571> and David L Ostendorf “Luke 4:21-30 Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word*, ed. Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlette (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 308-312.

When we listen to voices that tell us the other person is less than human, violence seems a more expedient solution.

Do people achieve their stated goals by carrying out violence? Erica Chenoweth spent years studying all the factors contributing organized violence and the effectiveness of terrorism. ²

While in school, she admits to being cynical about the idea of nonviolent conflict, but grudgingly attended a conference. One of the workshops presented compelling examples of peaceful protests as more effective in creating lasting change.

She dismissed the findings as a confirmation bias, meaning the researchers only studied the historical instances that supported what they wanted to be true. They were confirming their biases or feeding the desired outcome of those who sponsored the research.

Like many other Ph.D. students, skepticism and personal curiosity shaped her research. No one had compared the success rates of violent protests to non-violent protests through broad, object research. Until then.

² Dr. Chenoweth's research and scholarship led her to the faculty of Harvard University where she continues to study the impact of nonviolent movements.

Looking at hundreds of campaigns over the last century, Chenoweth found that *nonviolent* campaigns are twice as likely to achieve their goals as violent campaigns.

Nonviolent campaigns led to political change 53% of the time compared to 26% for the violent protests. Think of Mahatma Gandhi in India. Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Harriet Tubman and those of the underground railroad. And decades later MLK and the civil rights movement of our own time.

Nonviolence never depends upon being healthy or wealthy, armed or well resourced, unified in age, gender, or ethnicity. If anything, nonviolence benefits from diversity. Nonviolent-based movements attract participants from all walks of life and represent the broader population's interests. Such diversity benefits much of the rest of life.

The more astounding fact about nonviolent protests is that movements which attract a scant 3.5% of the population never fail to bring about change. That doesn't seem like much, but it is enough to end oppression.

Our human history, victory goes to the movements that bring life.³

³ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world>

The practice of nonviolence also creates the conditions for violent hubris to reveal itself clearly in some people's hearts.

The crowd's response on that day demonstrates how Jesus' ministry will make people uncomfortable who remain narrowly focused on themselves and their community.

Jesus' desire to heal humanity by building up humanity draws the line between those who are oppressed and those who participate in systems of oppression and thirst for more.

So where does Jesus go? He builds a ministry, one follower at a time, then another, and another. His followers ignored the crowd's roar and allowed themselves to be shaped by God's word, a word that endures beyond empire and boundary.

By the time Rome's violence hung him on the cross, Jesus amassed a crowd. What is a statistical 3.5%? Who knows. When all seemed lost and against all hope, a few held on and kept his word. Overtime, his gospel became the most successful movement of divine-human origin.

So many in our day seem ready and willing to throw someone over the edge of the cliff because of the opinions they hold, or the beliefs they express, or just because they are different.

Far too many people seem to be so concerned with their own understanding of scripture, and of God, and of politics that they can never hear any good news from anyone who doesn't say it or believe it the way they do.

Jesus launches his ministry with a message of hope for the marginalized and disadvantaged in this world, and to those whose hope and confidence rest in God. His life teaches us:

God's love knows no boundaries.

God's love isn't dependent on correct belief or practice.

God doesn't prefer one heritage or one tradition or one ethnicity over another.

The question before us is whose voice will shape our lives? Will we listen to the crowd and its fear? Or, will we trust the age-old voice of God, expressed in scripture and in the life of Jesus? What will our actions reveal about the contents of our hearts?



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