

This morning's Gospel text in Luke won't make a lot of sense without first talking about what happens right before it. Let's do a quick review. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is baptized by John and then is sent into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation from the devil. Today's story is a continuation of what takes place right after Jesus returns in the power of the Spirit from the wilderness. He goes first to Galilee and was praised by everyone and then he went on to Nazareth, his hometown and preached his first sermon. Here Jesus reveals his identity and message only after he has wrestled in the wilderness. However, it's in his own hometown and "within the space of these ten verses that everything goes south. Curiosity turns into contempt. Delight gives way to hatred. Worship morphs into violence. Why?" (Debie Thomas, www.journeywithjesus.com). Let's turn to scripture to explore God's Word together but first, let us pray. **PRAY. READ Luke 4:21-30.**

Paraphrasing a biblical verse (John 8:32), the former pastor of Riverside Church in NYC, William Sloan Coffin, once said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you uncomfortable." Aldous Huxley, author of the novel, Brave New World, went even further saying, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad." This passage from Luke does both for different people, but I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I? Again, this is Jesus' first recorded sermon, and it is short. Jesus gets up in front of his hometown synagogue leaders and friends- those who helped to mentor him and shape his faith- and he reads from Isaiah 61:1-2, which asserts that there is good news for the

poor, release for captives, sight for the blind, and freedom from oppression. He finishes up by proclaiming that this was the year of God's favor (v. 20). Everyone was staring at him, like, "wait. What just happened?" Then he finishes by saying that today this anticipated prophecy would be fulfilled in their hearing (v. 21). In other words, "Friends, stop looking at me- you have what you need. It's all here" (Nadia Bolz-Weber, *If Jesus Was Your Preacher: a Sermon*). And then he sits down. Mic drop. Except for the fact that it was Jewish custom to sit down to preach after reading the scripture.

And everyone was raving about today's preacher, Jesus! Town hero come home! He got a few "that a boys" and "Can you believe that's Joseph's boy up there making us proud?" But Jesus wasn't finished preaching yet. He continues with a famous proverb, "Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum'" (v. 23) and then he brings up two of the most well-known prophets, Elijah and Elisha, and he uses two examples of them ministering outside their hometowns to illustrate his point.

Episcopal priest and prolific writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes about a retreat that she once attended. The retreat leader asked those gathered there to think of one person who best represented Christ in their lives. While many spoke of people who had shown up and been there for them in hard times, one woman silenced the room with her response. She said, "I had to think hard about that question. I kept

thinking, 'Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill them for it?'" (*Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998).

What made the people gathered that day so angry and why the rejection and violent response? Before rejecting his words with one voice these same people were affirming and raving together with one voice about what came out of Jesus' mouths. What changed in just a few short verses? There are a few interpretations out there concerning this scripture. For example, some may read the Jews' fiery response as being against non-Jews, which is a go to interpretation for some. Yet, I'd like for us to be very careful with this interpretation. As one scholar puts it, "Such conclusions misread Jewish history. Jews in general had positive relations with Gentiles, as witnessed by the Court of the Gentiles in the Jerusalem Temple, Gentiles as patrons of synagogues (7:1-10), and Gentiles as god-fearers' (Acts 10)" (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p.107). So, to be clear- it's not a Jewish/Christian problem. Another scholar puts it this way, "The people there were not furious because Jesus had made special claims of himself. They were furious because he had taken a swing at their sense of divine privilege- and he had used their own scriptures to do it" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*).

Before Jesus offers the two examples of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, one scholar proposes that "Jesus shows his hand, as he does not plan to offer any of the prophetic and messianic deeds of power and blessings that he does elsewhere, like the five Sabbath healings he performs

immediately after today's story (4:31, 38; 6:6; 13:10; 14:1). The offense that sparks rage and violent backlash seems to be Jesus' refusal to act on his authority and power in his own hometown. I wonder if the issue here is over deeds, not belief" (Shively Smith, workingpreacher.org). "Surely, they must have thought, if their boy was willing to peddle miracles to perfect strangers 'out there,' he'd do a hundredfold back here at home. Among his kin. His insiders. His favorites" (Thomas). The folks who helped change his diapers, coach him ball, and knew him when he was just Joseph- the carpenter's- boy. They were looking for homeboy Jesus to hook them up. "Don't forget where you came from, Jesus, and who taught you math in the 6th grade!" But that's not the way Jesus nor today's story works out. No. You see- we all make assumptions and you know what they say about assumptions- sometimes we can be completely wrong.

A Lutheran pastor shares the story of having a conversation with her six-year old. She asks her what she learned in Sunday School and her daughter in a serious tone tells her that God is not a Lutheran! "How can that be?", she asks. Her mom then posted this conversation to Facebook and received several comments including: "Of course not, Jesus was a Presbyterian," typed a Presbyterian friend. Or "Next they will be telling her he wasn't even a Christian," quipped another. And from a fellow pastor, "What incompetent pastor approved that curriculum?" That would have been the pastor who posted the conversation. Oops. We all know that Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew but somehow we imagine that Jesus was like us and one of us "(Katie Hines-Shah, *The Christian*

Century). Like the synagogue members that day in Nazareth, we, too, share in the expectation of promise and fulfillment expressed in reading Isaiah 61. And we all want to make Jesus fit into our image of what and who he should be and whom he should help or heal, for example. But God is not ours. We are God's. What does that mean? "Maybe it means that if the Jesus we worship never offends us, then it's not really Jesus we worship. Yes, ouch. "It was the newspaper industry that first coined their role in society as 'comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable' and preachers have adopted that phrase as well. By grace, the Holy Spirit makes it possible for a single sermon to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. [I read recently where someone said,] **"If your preacher doesn't make you uncomfortable every once in a while, maybe you need a different one. Are we interested in growing spiritually or do we want a community that merely affirms what we already believe?** Jesus was killed for making people uncomfortable. Here are a list of things that make humans uncomfortable: Being told we are not pleasing God. Loving our enemies. Talking about politics in church. Praying for those who condemn us. Forgiving those who have sinned against us. Crossing boundaries to care for the Samaritan, the Canaanite, the Leper (or in the 21st Century - the Muslim, the White Supremacist, the Black Lives Matter Activist, the Transgender, the Republican, the Democrat, the Undocumented, the Mentally Ill, the Imprisoned)" (Jan Edminston, *A Church for Starving Artists* blog).

Be careful-for we're all capable of being blind to the truth. Remember, the Jesus Luke describes pushed so hard against his listeners' cherished assumptions, they nearly killed him. When was the last time Jesus made you that angry? What if we- the church- are the modern day equivalent of Jesus' hometown people? We're the ones most in danger of domesticating him. We're the ones most likely to miss him when he shows up in faces we don't recognize or revere" (Thomas). We're the ones who make assumptions about what Jesus should do and for whom, especially for those of us he loves! Yet, what if Jesus loves your enemy and you're asked to do the same? The last time I checked, we're asked to love our enemies.

Friends, God is God and we are not! God is not ours to claim or contain. God is on the move...busy at the margins...doing new things. The question is are we going to get over ourselves and our own expectations and assumptions about God enough to join God at work in this world- tending to the least of these and bringing good news to the poor? Luke tells us that Jesus- somehow- makes it through the angry mob and onto his next mission. We don't know how he makes his escape but Luke leaves it up to us, the readers, to gather that Jesus' mission and message have yet to be fully completed but must and will continue. "As the people of Nazareth once rejoiced to hear, we still believe: the scriptures are being fulfilled in our hearing (though that doesn't always guarantee acceptance- that's our work to do, with God's help). The work Jesus began in Jerusalem broke through boundaries to reach people in every

space and time” Hines-Shah). May we continue to be uncomfortable and offended as we seek to follow Jesus in this polarized world. Amen.