

## “The Magician Who Refused to Disappear”

Luke 4:16-30

Introduction:

Beloved of God, siblings, seekers and skeptics, hurting and hopeful, welcome.

Today I want to talk about a person who walked into the synagogue like he owned the place. But he didn't come to claim power. He came to give it away. He came with the smell of wood shavings on his clothes, dust on his feet, fire in his heart and healing in his hands. And they called him a magician.

But he was more than that.

He was Jesus. And this magician didn't come to amaze us with tricks. He came to undo our illusions.

This morning, I want to offer a word, a sermon in three parts, from the red clay streets of Greenville, where Brother Juniper might still be seen walking barefoot, handing out dandelions and dreams. A sermon about a Jesus who doesn't pull rabbits out of hats. A Jesus who pulls the rug out from under empires. A Jesus who doesn't disappear when the going gets tough, but shows up precisely where we try to disappear him.

Let's walk through these three points together:

Jesus the Disillusionist

Jesus the Undisappeared

Jesus the Inconvenient Gift

### I. Jesus the Disillusionist

William Willimon writes in *Why Jesus?* that when Jesus came on the scene, people thought he might be a magician. A wonderworker. A man with the power to heal and dazzle. In fact, “miracle” was the word they whispered like hope. Like a wish. But Willimon reminds us: Jesus didn't perform signs to amaze the crowd. He performed them to reveal the upside-down kingdom of God.

This is what we might call divine disillusionment.

You see, most magicians thrive on illusion. (As do most politicians). They want us to believe in the impossible so they can control the narrative. Magicians manipulate the eye, the hand, the light, the crowd. But Jesus didn't come to trick our senses—he came to help us look closely and SEE and to listen carefully and HEAR.

Jesus is the disillusionist who strips away our fantasies about God, about power, about ourselves. He disenchants us so we might finally see what's real.

In Luke 4, Jesus stands up in the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from Isaiah. Everyone is feeling proud: “He’s one of ours.” He announces good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind. They cheer—until he points out that God’s miracles have always been for outsiders. For widows in Zarephath. For Syrians with leprosy. For undocumented immigrants. For LGBTQ+ people. For anyone who is ‘othered.’

And just like that, the applause turns to rage.

Why? Because Jesus isn't the kind of magician they wanted. They wanted hometown miracles and national blessings. They wanted to believe in a god who played favorites.

But Jesus performs what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls the “preferential option for the poor.” Not a trick. Not a performance. A revelation. Jesus doesn't give people what they expect; he gives them what the upside-down kingdom demands.

Brother Juniper would say it like this: “Jesus didn't come to build a stage. He came to tear down the curtain between heaven and earth.”

## II. Jesus the Undisappeared

Let's be honest: people have tried to make Jesus disappear for millenia.

When he challenged the religious elite, they tried to push him off a cliff. When he threatened the empire, they nailed him to a cross. When he rose from the dead, they bribed the guards to lie about it.

Even now, we keep trying to make Jesus disappear. Not by hating him, but by taming him. Domesticating him. Turning him into a mascot for our politics or a life coach for our dreams. We dress him up in red, white, and blue. We silence him with our sermons.

But here's the thing: Jesus won't disappear.

He keeps reappearing in the MARGINS.

He shows up in refugee camps and soup kitchens. In jail cells and protest marches. In food lines and flooded fields. As Fannie Lou Hamer once said, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” And you better believe Jesus believes that too.

Fannie Lou Hamer didn’t see Jesus as a magic man in the sky—she saw him as a wounded healer walking with sharecroppers, singing with prisoners, fighting for dignity with the poor.

In the chapter “Magician,” Willimon says that Jesus refuses to be seen as just a miracle machine. And that refusal is what makes him holy. It’s not the healing. It’s why he heals. Not the sign, but what it points to.

Jesus keeps showing up not to impress, but to confront. Not to entertain, but to embody. He is what John Howard Yoder called “the politics of Jesus, “ a politics not of domination, but of deliverance.

Yoder says, “The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom. It is the kingdom come.” Which means that Jesus doesn’t disappear in suffering. He reigns from the middle of it.

Juniper would say: “You don’t need to look up to find Jesus. You need to look down into the face of the poor, the arrested, the forsaken, the invisible.”

And I swear to you, my friends, on the dandelion that grows through the crack in the sidewalk, he is there.

## Juniper Story

Juniper and the Smallest Song Beside the Razor Wire Fence (stories, poems and prayers from a little brother of saint frank)

It was a one-paragraph story printed on page A10 of the Charleston Post and Courier, tucked beneath an ad for fireworks and summer mattresses.

“Local Woman Disappears In Immigration Sweep,” it read.

“Maribel Castillo, 34, of North Charleston, was taken into custody by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers during a routine workplace sweep. Family and friends say she has not been heard from since. ICE officials refused comment. Calls to the Alligator Alcatraz Detention Center were not returned.”

No photograph.

No follow-up.

Just a disappearance.

Like morning dew after the sunrise.

Like hope beneath the heel of a boot.

Brother Juniper read the story with trembling hands under the flickering bulb at Triune Mercy Center, his patched brown hoodie soft as a prayer shawl, his tattered khaki pants smelling of street grime and incense. He was barefoot, as always, walking gently on this world because the earth is full of God and God is always being stepped on.

When he read about Maribel, he knew in his bones that this was not the end of her story. The upside-down kingdom, the one where the meek inherit the earth and the last are first and the refugees are called blessed, told him so.

So Juniper walked. Thumbed rides. Slept beneath bridges and prayed in ditches. Sang psalms to pigeons and lit prayer candles in gas station bathrooms. 12 days later, he stood at the outer fence of the Alligator Alcatraz Detention Center, sunk deep in the Everglades like a wound that never heals.

It was a terrible place.

Rows of razor wire glinting like false halos in the sun.

Surveillance towers that watched but never saw.

Inside, voices silenced behind walls built from fear and cruelty.

Outside, Juniper sat cross-legged in the muck.

He did not bring signs.

He did not shout.

He fasted.

He prayed.

He wept.

And on the seventh day, it came to him. A Carolina wren, brown as bread, light as breath, landed on the chain-link fence in front of him and cocked its head as if listening. Then it flew. Into the razor sky. Into the detention center.

Each morning after that, the wren returned with a piece of Maribel's voice in its beak.

A whisper of her son's name.

A memory of her abuela's hands patting masa into tortillas.

A verse of a hymn she sang in a small Catholic Church on the outskirts of the Holy City .

Juniper wrote them down on scraps of paper and pinned them to the fence with thorns and twine.

He read her back to herself.

Every word a resistance to the erasure.

Every syllable a resurrection.

When ICE guards tried to shoo him away, he smiled with the gentleness of spring rain and the stubbornness of a dandelion growing through a crack in the concrete near the entrance.

"They have the guns," he said, "but I have the bird."

Reporters came.

Then pastors.

Then children holding sunflowers and pictures of their mothers.

A nun from Savannah came barefoot, too.

A rabbi sent Juniper a loaf of challah.

An imam from Columbia brought a flask of honeyed tea and quoted the Qur'an:

"Whosoever saves a life, it is as if he had saved humankind entirely."

For forty days, Juniper did not eat.

His cheeks hollowed.

His ribs hummed hymns of longing.

But his eyes grew bright as Bethlehem stars.

Inside, Maribel heard the bird's morning song and smiled through her sadness.

She whispered prayers into the barred window, and the bird carried them back to Juniper.

They were communicating in the lost language now of silence, of sorrow, of soul.

Then, without warning, the gates opened.

A van rolled out.

And Maribel stepped into the light, blinking.

The wren fluttered above her shoulder.

Juniper wept again, this time with joy, and offered her a sip of water cupped in his hand and a piece of the challah bread.

No one in the administration claimed responsibility.

A clerical error, they said.

Or maybe a court order.

But the Post and Courier ran the follow-up on the front page this time.

“Woman Freed After 40-Day Vigil by Barefoot Friar.”

They even spelled Maribel’s name correctly.

They even printed a photograph.

In it, Juniper is sitting cross-legged beside her on the sidewalk outside the detention center.

Between them, the dandelion blooming gritty and golden.

The President tweeted that it was all a hoax.

That Maribel was a threat.

That Juniper was a radical, a disgrace, a fraud.

But Juniper didn’t care. He was already walking home, feet calloused, heart open.

Because he knew the truth:

That love is stronger than walls.

That the upside-down kingdom is rising like yeast in the dough.

That the bird still sings.

That there is another world, and it is possible.

In the upside-down kingdom, brown-skinned people don’t disappear without a trace.

They are called by name.

They are brought home.

And they are not alone.

Not as long as the wrens sing.

Not as long as dandelions bloom through concrete.

Not as long as someone kneels barefoot outside the gates and believes that prayer is more powerful than policy, and that even the smallest song can bring the walls down.

### III. Jesus the Inconvenient Gift

Let's not miss this final point: Jesus is a gift. But he's an inconvenient one.

You know how some gifts are more like projects? Like someone gives you a sourdough starter, and now you have to feed it every day for the rest of your life? Jesus is like that.

He's a gift, but not a clean one. Not a convenient one. He doesn't fit into our purses or our pocket or our Sunday schedule.

He fits into our wounds. He fits into our longings. He fits into our prayers for a better world. But only if we're ready to carry the cross that builds it.

Willimon warns us: Jesus is not safe. He is not tame. His miracles undo our systems. His compassion rewrites our economy. His forgiveness threatens our justice. His body breaks into our world like a sledgehammer made of bread and wine.

Gutiérrez would remind us that Jesus is not just a spiritual figure. He's the Word made flesh in history. And history has blood in it. Sweat in it. Rent bills and unpaid wages in it.

Yoder would say that Jesus is not apolitical. He's the most political person to ever live. He brought into our world an upside-down kingdom where the first are last and the last are first. Where leaders wash feet. Where enemies are loved. Where Caesar has no power.

And Fannie Lou Hamer? She'd remind us that Jesus is freedom. And freedom, friends, is never convenient. It always costs something. Maybe everything.

Juniper? He'd tell you a story. Maybe about a girl named María whose family is afraid of being deported. About how she gave him half a sandwich and called it communion. About how the kingdom came near in a paper bag and a smile.

Juniper would say, "Jesus isn't just a miracle worker. He is the miracle. He is the mustard seed. He is the dandelion breaking through the concrete. He is the inconvenient gift we didn't know we needed until he refused to leave."

## Conclusion: The Magic of the Kingdom

So here's the truth: Jesus isn't the magician we wanted. He's the disillusionist we need.

He doesn't make our pain disappear. He makes our illusions disappear. He doesn't disappear from the hard places. He plants himself there like a dandelion in the sidewalk crack.

He is the undisappeared one. The inconvenient gift. The scandal of grace wrapped in flesh and dirt and Nazareth accents.

Willimon said it best: Jesus isn't a spectacle. He's a sign.

A sign of the God who comes low. Who bends down. Who breaks bread and chains. Who upsets our tables and then invites the beggars to sit.

That's the upside-down kingdom.

And that's the Jesus I want to follow.

I want to follow him into the crowd, and up the hill, and into the jail, and under the bridge, and out to the detention center. I want to follow him not because he'll dazzle me, but because he'll undeceive me.

Because, friends, the greatest miracle of all?

Is that Jesus sees us. All of us. And he stays.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

## Benediction:

Go now, not to seek magic but to bear witness.

Go disillusioned of every illusion except the grace of God.

Go with eyes open, hearts broken, hands ready.

For the kingdom has come near—

and you are its miracle.