

February 3, 2019 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Luke 4: 21-30

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the fourth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

²¹Then [Jesus] began to say to [all in the synagogue in Nazareth,] “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He 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.’ ” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But 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; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Sometimes the distance between awe and anger is startlingly short. Sometimes vast differences live within tiny spaces. What feels like it belongs on a different planet, is right here with us on ours. How is there room for so much difference within so much commonality?

Somehow, I belong to the same species as people who run voluntarily when something isn’t chasing them...or when they’re not late for a train...

And you may be equally startled to know that you and I share so much of the same ancestral DNA...even though I really, really don’t like ketchup...or baths. (I mean...I like showers. I bathe...but I don’t like being human soup. Not relaxing.)

All of that is to say...to fully appreciate the gospel’s message today, we have to return to where we just came from, because the lectionary divides one episode into two parts...and

when we look at the whole story, we really can see things change very quickly. The people have just heard Jesus speak and been so in awe of him. But by the time we leave Nazareth today, they've tried to physically attack him.

That they could turn on him so quickly...do such an about face...is kind of unsettling. But I think it's unsettling because we feel how true it is, that so many different possibilities live inside us...just below the surface all the time.

I was out of town this past week, at two different conferences. And at one of them, our lecturers shared a theory they've developed for leading for transformative change. I'm always a little bit skeptical of the latest and greatest theory of change or leadership (because it always feels like a fad and a competition to come up with new words for old ideas). But I do think Reesheda Graham-Washington and Shawn Casselberry are on to some things.

They base their teaching around the premise that everyone has great and multi-faceted power. Being made in the image of God, and recipients of the promise and presence of the Holy Spirit means we all have a soul force beyond what we might believe. They use this word "soul force" in the same vein as Martin Luther King, Jr...who took it up from Mahatma Ghandi's teachings on *satyagraha*. It means holding firmly to truth...It means insistence on love and justice. And that capacity is alive in each of us.

Reeseheda and Shawn would have us trust that when we are looking and hoping for transformation, we can resist the temptation to reach outside ourselves...to an expert or an external or prepackaged solution. They would say that the change we seek...that may feel light years away...isn't. Because it is within our power to harness how God has gifted us, and we can find transformation through change as small as a pivot – a shift of direction. If we change our direction or approach to life and the world just a little bit, we can end up in whole new places.

(Now, I'll pause for a moment to say, that doesn't mean we're each supposed to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps without love, help, support, medication, or the other things we need to empower us. This tapping into soul force is often a communal or relational task, and it isn't meant to supplant the things we do to care for ourselves. Nor is it meant to shame us when we feel stuck. We need each other...and time...and love...and all kinds of help and support to be our best selves. And...we are also amazing and powerful...because we are God's precious children, and the Creator of the galaxies loves us and knows our names.)

If what Reesheda and Shawn taught us is true, then it might make the rapid twist in this story less surprising. Because anger can be just a pivot away from awe.

That's scary...but also hopeful...because it means that in that place of anger...love and wonder are still close by...within reach. The story could have turned back another way. And Jesus didn't let it end with violence. He passed through the midst of their anger and walked into a future they hadn't found yet...and that they wouldn't find until he walked through death again on another hill in another city, not too much later.

So, you see, we don't need an expert from somewhere "out there" to offer us some magic program or potion or diagnosis so we can finally become who we are supposed to be. We are who we're supposed to be already. And, God has placed what we need into our midst...in us. We are exactly the people who God wants in this place at this time...and we have important work to do. No one has ever gotten off the hook with God by insisting they are not enough...not the person for the job. Moses didn't think he could speak well enough to command Pharaoh's attention...and he led the people to freedom. Nobody thought a tiny shepherd could be a king...yet that is what David became. The people who gathered around Jesus weren't much of anybody. Yet, they would be the ones to carry the story about how the world had been reborn through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

We can look not further than Jeremiah today. He insists he is too young. He says, "I'm only a boy." But God says, "Don't say 'I'm only a boy...' I am with you. And I have made you powerful beyond your imagination."

Whatever you are that makes you feel like you're not enough...not called...whether you are only a child...only an elder...only a teacher...or a high school graduate..." Whatever your "only" is...Know this, God's answer to your feeling of being "only" what you are...is to say, "You are not *only* anything."

And, of course, if it is really true that God has put in us the power to be a part of the healing of the world...then we'd better brace ourselves. Because it might just be that God gave us that ability...because God intends for us to use it.

And that's frightening...because Jesus words for the people in his hometown are true for us. "I didn't come to fulfill the prophecy for *you*," he says. "I'm not a local savior. My reach is going to be wider than you can imagine. Just like the prophets showed you how God's blessing would overflow beyond the boundaries we have been tempted to draw around God's concerns and love...so will I." And that's the thing about the soul force God places in us. It has power to transform the things we see as divided...as insurmountably separated. It turns barriers into bridges...hurt into hope...death into life. God takes things we see as

immutable binaries and just ignores the boxes and borders and walls and rules that separate us from each other and God. It's how God sees fit to keep expanding the lineage of the Great Family of Abraham to include people like us...Jews *and* Gentiles...men and women and nonbinary folx...the young and the old...people who run for fun and people who don't like ketchup...It's how God can make the Red Sea a gateway instead of a grave... Its how God can make the belly of a whale a vessel of deliverance instead of digestion... It's how God transforms the cross from a place of humiliation to the place where the life that triumphs over death is born...

That power of God is at work in this world...and in you. And no borders or boundaries will stop it. May you believe in the power of God, to make you and all of Creation whole...and may we all be ready to trust the power God has put inside of us to be a part of that work. Because we aren't *only* anything. We are children of God. And there is so much possibility...so much to do and be...right here...right now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.