

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
January 31, 2010 – 4th Sunday After Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:6-10

"Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

Luke 4:20-28

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' " "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

There is no way around it. We cannot “sugarcoat” it or “softsoap” it. The people of Nazareth were in a murderous rage in response to Jesus’ sermon.

It did not start that way. As you remember from last week, Jesus came back to his hometown to go to church. When he was recognized in the crowd, he was asked to read and to comment on the scripture text for that day. At this point everything was going well.

The passage Jesus read could rank as one of the top favorites for the Jewish people in the first century. Isaiah 61 tells of a time when God’s grace would break through in a miraculous way in the world.

The people of Nazareth longed to see this happen. They lived in an area of the country far removed from the center of Jewish life. There was so little Jewish identity for these people that, in Matthew’s gospel, this region was called “Galilee of the Gentiles.”

So, the people yearned for the promises given in Isaiah to be fulfilled. Isaiah 61 spoke of a time of restoration for God’s chosen people. It spoke of God sending a messiah to save the people. This messiah would bring good news, would bind up the brokenhearted, would proclaim liberty to the captives and release for the prisoners. The people of Nazareth had been oppressed for so long that they were ready for God to work on their side for a change.

Jesus read the passage and then sat down. The people waited expectantly to hear what he would say next. And, very simply, he said to them, “This passage of scripture has come true today, as you have heard it being read.” The people loved this. They marveled at Jesus’ wisdom. So far, still so good.

Then, Jesus used two stories to illustrate the meaning of Isaiah 61. Both of them were unusual choices.

First, he reminded the crowd of the miracle performed by the prophet Elijah. There had been a drought for 3½ years, and famine quickly followed. Jesus reminded the crowd that there were many Israelites, many of God's chosen ones, who were starving. Yet, Elijah offered help to an outsider, a widow who lived in Sidon. The prophet miraculously provided food for the widow and her son as long as the famine lasted. In this story, God blessed an outsider, not one of the Jews. Had we been there, we probably could have heard some discontented rumblings in the crowd.

The other example Jesus gave was not any better. You see, he reminded the crowd of the story in First Kings about Namaan, who was a leper and a Syrian military officer who had led armies to fight against Israel. Even still, Elisha healed him. Now, once again, there were many lepers in Israel, but God chose to bless an outsider instead of one of the Chosen Ones.

That is when the rage of the people erupted. They did not want to think of God blessing outsiders. They certainly did not want their God to show grace, forgiveness, mercy, or love to those outsiders. Jesus knew what he was doing when he told both of those stories. He was making the point that God had worked outside of the exclusive circle of chosen Jews and that God would continue to do so.

It would be likely that the people of Nazareth felt a sense of pride and privilege having Jesus in their town. After all, he was gaining fame across the region. That sense of privilege quickly evaporated, however, when the people realized they were not in line to receive special treatment or favored status. What should have been joy at the possibilities of many people in every nation being helped by Jesus turned to rage. That, of course, led to the murderous intent of the crowd.

The question we should ask now is what this story means to us. After all, we were not there. Though we played no part in the narrative, there are at least two facets of the story that have implications for us.

First, Luke's gospel makes the point on how narrow minded the people of Nazareth were. They missed an opportunity to participate in a new future because they could not see beyond themselves. We really should not be too hard on them because we probably would have made the same mistake. The people of Nazareth illustrated the human tendency to be willing to settle for an understanding of God who is just big enough to meet our own needs and no bigger.

We see this reflected in our world all the time. We know people who believe that whatever God is going to do with the world has to start with them as if there is no one else deserving of God's love. A variation to this perspective is for them to believe that only their prayers will be answered because, after all, they are so special. We can also see it in the jealousy displayed, often unspoken but still real, when another church or another minister or another denomination or religious tradition is experiencing a renewal of the working of God. Or, we can see it as we try to dictate to others exactly where and when and in what manner God can work in their lives.

The second point that this story makes is from the perspective of Jesus. Note Jesus' words as he laments the fact that no hometown boy is ever recognized as a true prophet. That clearly suggests that there is a price to be paid for those who would follow a prophet, especially one like Jesus.

As Luke wrote this gospel, the early church was spreading throughout the world. It had already reached to Rome and was moving beyond. With this expansion came persecution. For the first few centuries of the existence of the church that persecution just increased. Luke told the story of how the hometown folks rejected Jesus – his teaching and his mission – and tried to kill him as a way to encourage and support that fledgling organization. If it could happen to him and his work, do not worry if it happens to you, Luke seems to be saying.

We understand that there is more to the world than “hometown.” In Luke’s account, Jesus did not despair because he was rejected by Nazareth. As the story of Jesus continued, we see that there were other people, nearby, like in Capernaum, who would embrace what Jesus was doing. We read how crowds would search for him even in the wilderness in order to hear his teachings. Jesus himself was constantly moving ahead with his work to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God.

That is important for us to hear because that mission, that work, has been passed along to us. As the church of Jesus the Christ in 2010, we have been given that same mission. I know that it is easy to get sidetracked by the narrow vision of some and to forget that we are called to go to the world. I also know that it is easy for us to forget that our work here is not really “our work” but God’s mission. Our responsibility is simple. We are called to be faithful to do what we should and we can to disseminate the message of the love of God and not be worried about failure and rejection.

Jesus proclaimed the message of the good news of God’s love to the people in Nazareth that day. They rejected that message, but that fact did not stop the story. The good news moved from there throughout Galilee and even reached Jerusalem. The people in Jerusalem also rejected the message and the messenger and even succeeded in killing him, but they could not stop the story.

Dear people of God, the good news that Jesus read about and proclaimed that day in Nazareth was a mission to include all of humanity in God’s grace. Despite the rejections, that mission has been successful. Because of that, you and I, as outsiders, are able to experience God’s love. And, we are called to include all people in our ministry as well. Thanks be to God. AMEN.