

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

Brentwood Presbyterian Church
January 12, 2014

The Light of a Prophet

Luke 4:18-19 & Psalm 40:1-11
(118, 374, 507, 634)

It would appear, according to the earliest of witnesses,
that Jesus is offensive.
He angers people.
He generates outrage
by what he does and what he says.
This is not some attractive celebrity
attracting thousands on a weekly basis
telling people what they want to hear.
This is not some religious or secular guru
outlining the five easy principles of the good life.

Jesus is something very different.
You begin to get that sense
when you look carefully at the text for his sermon
in his hometown synagogue
that we read this morning.

Picture the scene.
The religiously respectable have gathered for weekly worship.
That itinerant woodworker, Jesus,
son of Mary and Joseph,
first-born of a large family,
has been invited back to preach.
He's been away for a while.
Rumours of his activities have been around.
What he says seems a bit radical and harsh.
And what do we make of those stories of healing?
He certainly seems to be attracting attention.
This should be interesting.

In Mark, as we read last week,
the congregation was both astounded and offended.
But Mark, as is his habit,
gives us few of the details.
Luke creates a fuller picture for us –

we have the text, more details about the depth of the outrage,
and an account of an early attempt to kill Jesus.
It's all pretty dramatic.

But what's so offensive?
What's so outrageous?
Why are people so angry at this native son?

The key, as I see it, is his choice of text.
The key to understanding this reaction
is the text we read this morning.

It's from Isaiah 61:1-2.
This part of the book of Isaiah
was likely written after the experience of the Babylonian exile,
after Israel and Judah had yet again been subjected to a foreign power,
after their freedom to be a faithful people of God had been severely limited.
The whole of Isaiah 61
speaks to the kind of social order God wants
among his freed and restored people.

This people will be a model of justice,
so filled with praise and devotion
that it becomes a light for all the nations of the earth.
This quality of community will bring joy and strength.
Anything less will make God angry.

When the vision of this possibility
confronts a complacent and comfortable community,
it is offensive.

When the vision of this possibility
confronts people who think they have God under control,
they get angry.

When the vision of this possibility
dawns on those who have been excluded and exploited,
they find hope.

Jesus, as we saw last week,
had grown up among the peasant and working classes of his day.
He had an exceptional interest in the traditions of his Jewish faith
and he studied them carefully.

His grasp of the essence of Judaism
astounded his complacent and comfortable listeners.
But what he found at the core of that faith outraged them.

Jesus knew the ordinary people of his day exceptionally well.
He had travelled and worked with them all his life.
He would choose his most intimate friends from among these people.
He knew their pains and joys,
their problems and possibilities,
their challenges and its opportunities.

And he knew that God wanted them to flourish,
that God had created them to be blessings in a community of blessing.
God had created them to use their gifts
to build a just and peaceful community
in which there would be prosperity and freedom for all,
where the brokenhearted would be healed,
where the earth's resources would be shared.

This is not what was happening in Jesus' community.
It's not what's happening in our community.

The light shed on our own faith by this prophetic dimension of Jesus' witness,
on our own work and witness as Christians,
can be challenging, if not downright offensive.

It is a light that reveals to us
the breadth of God's love and what it empowers us to do.
That love is for everyone and the whole creation,
not just for the pure and those who think they are in God's good books.
That love wants justice and equity among all peoples,
not privilege and power in the hands of a few.
That love wants us to use our resources,
whatever they may be,
for the well-being or *Shalom* of God's beloved children and their earthly home.

This is a very different way of seeing ourselves in the world
that Jesus is pointing to in this text
and that he goes on to model in his ministry.

First,
Jesus sees the world as God's creation
and realizes that God remains active in that world
continuing to pursue and realize his original purpose
of creating a space where his creatures could thrive.
This is God's world and God is in control,
strange as that may seem
and hard as that is to believe.

Many reject that view.
They challenge the faithful to show proof
in what is happening in the world.
That's hard to do
with the callous capitalism and menacing militarism
that fills so much of our screens and speakers these days.

But God's ways are not our ways.
God's Holy Spirit works within us and among us
in ways that confound and amaze us.
We are touched by God's accepting love
in moments when we least expect it.
And we discover ways to help others flourish
in the most surprising places.

As a result of this experience, we see that God is real and is in control.

Second,
Jesus models the way this reality shapes the lives
of those who choose to become disciples,
who choose to live out of this prophetic imagination,
who choose to bring all of their unique gifts and graces
into the mission of helping people flourish.
This is where they find beauty and joy,
where they find their soul's delight.
They know God is with them and for them.
Out of that strength,
they have the determination to be different,
to say 'NO' to compliance and complacency
in a society of privilege, oppression, and waste.
They courageously choose to serve God
by being a blessing in the world.

As a result of this realization, we follow Jesus faithfully.

Being prophets in our own time is not easy.
But that's what we take on when we choose to follow Jesus, the Christ.
We choose to challenge those things we encounter
that keep people oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, and poor.
We choose to use our gifts and resources
to bless this world into a flourishing community
filled with beauty and delight.

And that, I firmly believe, is a life worth living.