

Luke 4.21-30 Epiphany 4

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4.18-19)

As you may already know, in the Hebrew Bible the idea of sabbath extends beyond the command to rest on the seventh day. There is also a command to observe a sabbatical year—basically that the land must also be rested every seven years. Indeed, in western North Dakota where my grandparents farmed through the Dust Bowl years, summer fallowing remains standard operating procedure. In the Jewish practice, plowing, pruning, planting are prohibited, and anyone who is in need, including strangers, might glean from the orchards and vineyards. Anything harvested during this time can be consumed but not sold.

Also, however, and perhaps more inconveniently, indentured servants must be freed and debts must be forgiven after seven years. —All you who still owe money on your student loans decades later, rejoice! And after seven cycles of seven years, a Jubilee, or year of the Lord’s favor, all land would return to its original owners, meaning that real property could not be bought up by speculators or pass permanently out of the hands of someone down on their luck.

While archaeologists question whether these edicts ever came to full fruition, they are not just muttered in some obscure corner of scripture but are set out and harkened to in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Chronicles, and Kings. Thus, when Jesus in last week’s reading claims the right to proclaim Jubilee, he is calling on his audience to remember that God has been standing on the side of the poor and disenfranchised for a long time, even before Isaiah became a prophet.

Perhaps you’re nodding along approvingly, or perhaps you’re feeling very distant from a culture who would claim these practices, but this is where Jesus’ audience in the synagogue is coming from. As long as he is merely

repeating soothing and familiar words of scripture, he is brilliant in their eyes: “Is this not Joseph’s son?” As long as these words stay in church and remind us that we are in the in-group, the ones whom God loves. Look at our hometown boy making good! He speaks so well!

But then Jesus has to go and spoil it all by suggesting that these words have concrete reality, that God cares enough about healing and feeding that they ought to go do something about it. And even more that God’s care extends beyond the traditional chosen people, the ones we can vouch for as “deserving” of help. That sticks in their craw. That makes them mad, mad enough to try to throw their beautiful hometown boy off a cliff. More on this in a moment.

Meanwhile, there is a telling echo in the juxtaposition of Jeremiah’s story over our gospel reading. As God calls him to action, Jeremiah displays a sincere humility: “Don’t ask me to do that, God. I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” I suspect that a lot of us have some sympathy for Jeremiah in this position. I don’t know what the heck I’m doing. Ask someone else, God. They’ll do a better job. This is too much responsibility. I don’t know how to handle it.

But God answers with a gesture both lovely and helpful, putting out God’s hand and touching Jeremiah’s mouth, saying, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.” You will be equipped for the work you have to do.

I believe this with my life: God will equip you for the work that is yours to do.

Now, having made this extravagant claim, I also have to tell you that in the course of doing his work, Jeremiah got himself thrown down a well. Unlike Jesus, he didn’t just turn around and walk back through the crowd. Being equipped for the work does not make it risk-free, OK?

But now I have to ask. Do we, here in this room, do we like the idea of God more than we like God? I think that’s what’s going on for the crowd in Nazareth. As long as God confirms us in our values and beliefs, we like God fine. But when God calls us to action, and the Holy Spirit leads us to speak a prophetic word or change our time-honored practices or take a social or even a physical risk for the sake of others. . . how do we feel about God then?

We are happy to donate to the food shelf in the name of feeding the poor, but what do we do when it means confronting the systems that deliberately create scarcity in order to maximize profit for the few?

We are happy to recycle our aluminum cans in the name of caring for creation, but are we willing to address those forces which first subsidize catastrophic climate change and then ignore or repudiate those people and living things who fall victim to disaster? Including global migrants?

We are happy to point out injustices of racism, homophobia, and war, but are we ready to root out the strains of white supremacy in our own lives and communities?

Loving your neighbor can be messy, difficult, troublesome. Are you ready to walk me over to that cliff yet?

OK, most of you have probably heard the Bob Dylan song “With God on Our Side,” which satirizes the tendency of religious people to put our own words and wishes into God’s mouth. I am not immune to that, and, frankly, neither is any of us. But if we do really follow Jesus we’ll find our way.

I mean, of course, that we try to live lives that imitate Christ, AND that we fail. But I also suggest that we return in imagination to follow Jesus to the brow of the hill. The crowd behind him pushing, shouting, murderous in their anger. Watch closely what he does next. He doesn’t shoot his way out. He doesn’t shrink or fawn. He simply turns around to face the crowd and walks back through their midst. He continues on his way, the Way. And so might we. Courage, as they say, is not the absence of fear but the recognition that something else is more important than fear.

I stand by my claim last week that sometimes the most heroic acts are also the most mundane. I remember a story from a few years ago in which a Muslim woman in hijab was being hassled on a bus. Alarmed, another woman stood up and engaged her in conversation. She didn’t confront the bullies, but with her presence made common cause with the woman who was being harassed. That’s all she had to do. Don’t underestimate the difference you make by showing up.

All that said, God is calling you and your specific gifts into service for our neighbors. The work can be messy, and difficult, and troublesome. Whether you count yourself an elbow or an eyebrow, each member is needed in order for us to be the Body of Christ.

But Paul continues this week, reminding us that no awestrking combination of gifts is worth a thing without love. And love is our beginning. God's promise in your baptism is that you are a cherished and beloved member of the family. Named and loved, washed clean and enveloped in the communion of saints, you are transformed in this body, into this body, for the sake of the world. Amen.