

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our gospel text this morning picks up exactly where we left off last week: “Then [Jesus] began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” Jesus had gone to the synagogue, as was his custom. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he read about the Spirit of the Lord being upon him to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Luke recounts the story up to this part like Mark and Matthew, his synoptic gospel counterparts. Jesus’ sermon here was quite brief, nine words to be exact: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. “All spoke well of him,” Luke tells us, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

It seems like all was going well in Nazareth that day. The hometown crowd received him well. But then Jesus’ sermon gets a little longer and the mood of the assembly quickly changes from amazement to angry rage. Perhaps this text is just a warning for the long-winded preachers in the world. But I think there is more here, especially in Luke’s account. In the parts that Matthew and Mark leave out, there is both good news and challenge for all of us in this morning’s gospel.

“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”

Then Jesus’ continues to speak, perhaps he discerns that a nine-word sermon isn’t quite enough, even for his hometown crowd. And what he says doesn’t receive the same response as his initial comment. No, instead, what he says leads the people into so much anger that they drag him out of town and prepare to throw him off the cliff.

So what is it about these five verses in our gospel text that lead the people to change so quickly from speaking well of Jesus to threatening his very life?

Jesus starts with a proverb and then retells their story, their story about famines in the past and those who suffered from leprosy. He recalls the prophets Elijah and Elisha and the great things they did among the people. He’s retelling the history of his people. But then he does something daring, so very daring. He tells their story truthfully.

Jesus is an insider in Nazareth. He was born there. The people know his family. They know his stories. If word has traveled back to his people, they would have known what Jesus had been up to over in Capernaum. They might expect him to do the same. But Jesus proclaims: “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.” The insider shall be outside, he seems to be saying.

And then he begins telling the stories of their forebears. He recounts the story that we find in the book of First Kings: “there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah...and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.”

Remember this one? God sends the prophet Elijah to Zarephath where he asks this widow for water and bread, and she protests saying that she has only enough for her and her son to have one meal before they die. Elijah promises that God will provide and God does. Later when the widow’s son dies, Elijah prays successfully and the son’s life is restored. It’s a wonderful witness to trusting God and the prophets God sends. But there’s a problem with the story.

The widow was a Gentile. And here comes Jesus, pointing out that Elijah was sent to this woman. She was an outsider.

Jesus also tells the story that we can locate in the book of Second Kings: “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

Remember this one? Naaman, a great warrior and commander of the Syrian army, suffered from leprosy. A servant girl suggests that Naaman travel to Israel to be cured. The prophet Elisha hears about Naaman’s problem and offers solution. Naaman, in turn, makes a great confession: Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel (2 Kings 5. 15). But again, in Jesus retelling of this story, there’s a problem.

Naaman was a Gentile. And here’s Jesus, pointing out that Elisha cured this man. He was an outsider.

Jesus, who hails from Nazareth, began his ministry in Capernaum, in Gentile country. And now he's coming home and telling stories about people from outside of the community as if they are to be regarded as insiders. This is a problem. Even if these people were included in the longer narrative of faith, something in Jesus' mentioning them stirs up emotion in the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus is pushing the envelope, so to speak.

Your stories are important, Jesus seems to be saying, but it's not all about you. It's not all about this single synagogue or this religious tradition. It's not all about you, look at God's bigger picture. The truth is, Jesus seems to be saying, God worked through Elijah and Elisha and that Gentile widow and that Gentile army general.

This account of Jesus' being run out of town is very Lukan in nature. Luke can be considered the gospel writer who is all about the lost and the forsaken. Luke is the writer who reports the shepherds at Jesus' birth. Luke tells more stories about women and social outcasts than the other gospels. Luke includes the lost parables: the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost (or prodigal) son. When things or people are lost, Luke reports in the joy upon their being found. Luke tells the story about Jesus in a way that reminds us that God is concerned for the lost and the forsaken, the Jew and the Gentile, the insider and the outsider, the one not usually or easily welcomed. In his hometown, Jesus speaks words that challenge: Your stories are important, but it's not just about you. In his hometown, Jesus reminds the people: God worked through Elijah and Elisha and the widow and the general.

The good news in this text is that Jesus comes for all of us who are lost and forsaken and in need of forgiveness and wholeness that comes through our Savior and our Lord. The good news is that Jesus comes and preaches and dies and is raised for all of us. But, there is challenge for us in our texts this morning as well. The beloved and overused-at-weddings Corinthians passage speaks of love. This is the love that Jesus showed us and gives to us. It is a love that is not boastful or rude. It is slow to anger and patient and kind. This love that we have been shown, especially on the cross, becomes our challenge.

You see, Jesus embodies that God is with you and calls you in love. You are inside God's embrace and care. But the challenge comes when Jesus embodies God who brings the outsiders inside.

God is with us. God is also with them. Whoever that "them" is. And I think for all of us this is a little different. Who is it difficult for you to imagine inviting to dinner? Who is the person or the group of people that you would struggle to welcome into your home, beside you in the pew or chair?

"The truth is," Jesus says, "That God is with you and ... God is also with them."

I have two hopes for us this morning. My first hope is that you will remember and experience that God is with you. God is with you in community, in this meal, in the sending to service and love. And my second hope for us all is that we'll continue to struggle to figure out who the "thems" are in our lives and in this congregation. Who is it difficult for you to imagine inviting to dinner? Who is the person or the group of people that you would struggle to welcome into your home or beside you in the pew or chair?

I hope that after challenging ourselves to identify those folks are, who the outsiders are to us, that we'll invite them, to church, to dinner, to sit beside us, that all might gather in love, in God's presence.

To the glory of God.