

Keep it Local
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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2-3-2019
Luke 4:21-30

Long ago, on a Sabbath morning, a young man stood up to read from one of the sacred scrolls. He didn't do this very often. It's not that he was uncomfortable speaking in public, nor did he feel like a stranger in a strange room. Quite the contrary – he'd known the folks in this place his whole life. He was one of them.

It's just that he always felt rather ordinary. Average build, average height, average intellect. It'd be a stretch to call him popular, or successful, or noticeable. He was just a day laborer in a forgotten coastal town. And now in his thirties, he'd found an indistinguishable routine: work, worship, and family. Rinse and repeat.

But lately, with a lot of discernment, and a little help from his cousin John, he was beginning to hear God in fresh ways. All of a sudden, the prophets of old were telling new stories, ripe with meaning and purpose. And he felt cloaked in God's presence. And he felt empowered – empowered to be the hands of God in the world.

And at about a quarter past eleven, the spirit was moving inside of him, and he felt his legs pushing him out of his chair, and his feet making their way to the front, and his hands reaching for the sacred scrolls, and his lips shouting, no singing, singing words of Jubilee: freedom for the oppressed; release for the captives; recovery of sight for the blind; land and people living in accordance and harmony with God's good purpose.

And it was all so surreal. The words he proclaimed flowed out of his mouth with ease. He was in the zone, y'all. And he felt each syllable rise through his chest, and burst out of his lungs with power and confidence. And he saw heads nodding and bobbing, and all eyes focused squarely on him, and he knew he had total command of the room. And he rolled up Isaiah's scroll, and he said, "Theses words, the ones about Jubilee that I've just read, they've been fulfilled in your hearing. Right now."

And the room was his. "Gimme some of that," the crowd proclaimed. "God and God's justice have come to Nazareth. Right here and right now. So don't delay. Give it to us right now. Heal our sick, and liberate our children, and put an end to all this blah we've been feeling. We're ready," they said.

When I read the beginning verses of today's lection, I feel a sense of anticipation. I notice a crowd of people who want the words Jesus is speaking to be true. They are excited and receptive and hospitable.

And truth be told, that's not really what I was expecting to notice when I reviewed this text. Maybe Mark and Matthews's versions of the stories are too fixed in my head. In each of those gospels, Jesus is instantly dismissed as "that carpenter's son," and the people in town are not only offended by the words he speaks, but also by his very presence. "Where does this guy get off thinking he's got that kind of authority? Have you ever?!?"

Or maybe I am just too familiar with the rejection portions at the end of all three versions of this story. Jesus gets run out of town for his actions, and narrowly avoids being thrown off a cliff!

But Luke's version of the story isn't all animosity. In Luke's version, the crowd is ready to hear news of Jubilee. "What a wonderful young man, and what wonderful words he's speaking," they say.

It's only when Jesus mentions where his ministry will begin that he angers the crowd. To paraphrase LeBron James, Jesus says, "I'll be taking my talents to South Beach."

Jesus continues:

You see prophets can't be successful prophets in their own hometowns. Remember Elijah and Elisha? It's not that there wasn't need where they were, it's that God needed them to address needs in other places. And by being present in the places where for too long God had felt absent, God's hope and God's love became evident both near and far. So if you want to experience the Jubilee I'm describing, you gotta let me go be a stranger in a strange land."

Luke's gospel reminds us that the only certainty about God is to expect the unexpected. God doesn't just work through unexpected people, or appear in unexpected places. When God decides to show up in unexpected people and in unexpected places, you can be sure God's gonna work in unexpected ways: the first will be last, the nearest will be the furthest away, the quickest will be the slowest, the weakest will be the strongest, the obvious will be the absurd.

Like those good folks in the synagogue, too often we expect the unpredictable, unimaginable, fantastic, marvelous works of God to conform to our limited expectations. How will we experience justice? When we can grasp it in our own hands. How will we experience the land? When we can till it for ourselves. How will we experience love? When our own hearts feel its pulsing.

And how will we know when we aren't experiencing justice? We'll see our neighbors, scratch that, the others – those who are undeserving, different, less-than – we'll see those people taking away OUR justice, and OUR land, and OUR love, and when they do, there won't be any left over for us.

We aren't a large group this morning, but we've got a diverse set of interests. And if Jesus was preaching in 2019 Charlotte, North Carolina, he might proclaim a justice that looks something like this: plenty of food for every child in our city; access to affordable healthcare, clean, safe housing, reliable transportation, and a quality education for every resident of Mecklenburg County; fair work and wages for those who seek it; grace for those need it; acceptance, belonging, and affirmation for those who strive to be decent, and even for those who don't. And land. Land that provides. Land that's accessible. Land that's bound up in the community, and the ones who till it.

In theory, there's not a one of you that wouldn't say Amen to these ideas – we all want to be loved and provided for.

Now imagine in his next paragraph that Jesus tells us where this new Jubilee will begin. He says the day has arrived, but it's not starting in your zip code, or your city, or your state, and maybe not even in your country. But it's starting nonetheless. You'll see.

I have a sneaking suspicion that not everyone in this room would be excited about the Jubilee Jesus describes. We prefer our Jubilees and our justice to be locally-served, thank you very much.

But that's the very thing that Luke's gospel seeks to dispel. God isn't local. God is global. And God isn't limited. God is unlimited. And God isn't predictable. God is unpredictable.

And what does that mean?

It means that when God's Jubilee is experienced by the Gentiles, it's big enough to also be experienced by Israel.

It means that when lunch counters and school buses and train stations are integrated, God's love is not spread too thin, but rather, the enough-ness of God's love is made evident to all people.

It means that when one neighbor, or one child, or one family experiences the favor of the Lord, all children, and all neighbors, and all families are one step closer to God's universal favor.

It means that God's Kingdom is not based on ORs, but rather it's steeped in ANDs. God loves and provides for ALL people: Women and gender-neutral and men alike; black and brown and white; poor and rich; gay and straight; documented and undocumented; neighbor and enemy; marginalized and privileged, Rams fans and Patriot fans and people who'll only watch for the commercials and half-time show tonight.

Jesus lived, and we do, too, in a world that says love, and justice, and everything vital is doled out like you are waiting in line at the DMV or the delicatessen – just grab a number, and we'll get to you if we are able.

But Jesus proclaimed a world where small numbers AND large numbers are served, and where the counter attendant doesn't clock out at 5 p.m.

Sardis Baptist Church, Jesus tells us today that the year of the Lord's favor is upon us. The question we must ask ourselves is this: Are we ready to receive the terms of this favor?

Amen.