

*Texts: Psalm 146; Luke 4:14-30*

*Subject: Sermon at Nazareth*

*Theme: Ready or Not*

Second Sunday after Epiphany; Jan. 17, 2021; *Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Nearly ten years ago, when we had just two children, Ivy and I stayed with my grandparents in South Florida. Seems like so long ago. Ivy and I would check in on social media on our phones, and the kids had their toys and gadgets. My grandfather, who who grew up on a farm in the Pennsylvania Dutch country, who served in the Navy during the Korean war, and made his living as a sign painter, would sit at the dining room table, and wonder, "What did we ever do without these things?" Technology, electronics and gadgets were not his thing. He was remembering a different time, a simpler era, with less noise, that probably existed in some places. I quote him every so often when the kids are asking to log onto their tablets to watch the latest videos from their favorite YouTube creators. "What did we ever do?"

There were also times he'd have the local news on the television and the volume so high you could barely hear yourself. We've gotten into a habit at home of watching television with the subtitles on. I think it's because we want to pay attention to what's on, but don't want to blast the volume. There's always some kind of background noise - someone doing dishes, running the washing machine, kids playing, and *animated* conversation. And just maybe my hearing has been affected by years of loud music and concerts as well. So if I can't hear well, at least I have the words scrolling across the screen. It helps too when someone says something, and you have to ask yourself - "Did they really just say that?"

Sometimes it's hard to hear.

We want our home to be a peaceful place, where we can hear each other speak, where we can relax, and rest. With social media, 24-hour news, violence and unrest, and so much fear, there's enough noise in the world. Ivy and I both work to make our home conducive to learning, sharing, growing, peacefully. We try. It doesn't always happen that way.

Could it have been much different 2000 years ago? From the waters of baptism, into the wilderness, in the power the Spirit, Jesus' ministry begins, ready or not. Luke tells us that he had gone all through Galilee, where he was teaching and was well received, and highly praised. But then he got to his hometown, the place where he was raised. Where he was well known as Joseph's boy. In the synagogue would be the ones who had studied the faith, were debating the issues they faced as a community, and they were praying together. Jesus, when given the scroll read from Isaiah 61:

Good news to the poor. Release to the captives.

Sight to the blind. Freedom for those oppressed.

Words of comfort. If you identified with the poor, this was good news. If you were held captive, this word could bring hope. If you were unable to see, there was a promise of healing. For those who were oppressed in any way, freedom was on the way. They knew the scripture well - it's one of the greatest hits of the prophets' catalog. But then Jesus spoke, and his message indicate that the fulfillment of this word was right there with them. This word was fulfilled in him.

Of course, they weren't his followers.

They knew the scripture, and their tradition had them expecting something else. Their future Messiah was the one who would overthrow the powers of the day, and lead like David did, conquering enemies. Jesus' message is a wide welcome for those outside Nazareth - and this was offensive to those who maybe expected to the the front of the line for Jesus' healing and teaching. The promise of jubilee - the cancellation of debts, the leveling of barriers, and an extension of the love of God to all people and cultures would not be tolerated. They weren't ready for the wideness of this mercy. But Jesus - the living Word - senses their frustration, and instead of comfort, challenges their expectations, gives them a word they don't want to hear, and finds his own life on the line.

We all have been through a year that has challenged our expectations, made so many of us question who we are as followers of Jesus, as Americans, and as neighbors. The violent attack on our Capitol building little more than a week ago shocked some and terrified most of us, incited rage and condemnation across the world, and perhaps awakened some to realize that there is still evil in the world, that there are still white supremacists and nationalists calling themselves Christians, and that we are not as exceptional as we once thought, and that the mistrust that has grown over the last few decades has brought us to a dangerous place in our history.

What used to be debates about issues have become attacks on people. As a culture, we've drawn more lines in the sand, broken more relationships with friends and family members, rejoiced in the downfall of our enemies, and have again divided the body of Christ instead of recognizing the image of God in one another, instead of working together, instead of repenting and being opened to God's grace in Christ Jesus.

Bible scholar Fred B. Craddock wrote about this passage in Luke's gospel, noting that "Anger and violence *are the last defense* of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced." Those in the synagogue in his hometown couldn't hear the truth. They wouldn't accept the good news Jesus was bringing him. They wanted to hear about their chosen-ness, their special status and a message that confirmed what they already knew. But Jesus is the Word of God, and right there, surrounded by friends and family. He went beyond their expectations, and brought a word that challenged them. Was it because they expected special treatment from the new hometown teacher? What kind of faith would be required for them to call Jesus Lord, instead of merely the son of the local carpenter? Their thoughts turned to rage - a rage that sought to silence this Word, to put it to death by violence - by throwing him off a cliff. Death by stoning would have been the punishment for blasphemy, and hurling the person onto the stones would be seen as the same sentence. And how interesting is it that Jesus *had just responded* to the Devil's temptation to throw himself down from the high place and have the angels lift him up. Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 6, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Jesus doesn't give easy answers here. I don't have any either, unfortunately. Jesus doesn't make them feel good, or affirm what these insiders already believe. But He sets the tone, and a direction for his life and the ministry - Luke reports on it in the book of Acts. This direction is followed by the disciples and the early church in spite of the many conflicts around them. The noise doesn't go away. But into the fear and pain and violence of the world Jesus preaches good news anyway. Jesus announces the Lord's favor to those who have never been known to be favored by God. Jesus - the

Word with us - proclaims freedom from fear and inaugurates the new Kingdom, with a particular promise for those oppressed by the systems of the world.

Tomorrow, as many of us remember Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and share quotations from his most famous speeches and letters across social media, will we truly hear his call for the ongoing work of justice? He knew it wouldn't be finished in his time. But dreams are fantasies without concrete steps forward, and the generations that follow us will likely still have work to do.

Are we able to hear the good news through all the noise? I pray that we do. Are we insiders or outsiders? Are we ones who expect something from Jesus, because of where we're from? because of what we've owned or earned? Or can we be ones who gratefully accept and welcome the radical grace he offers? And when we don't get what we expect, will we allow rage to harden our hearts too? The Word is with us and in us. This word that speaks above the noise of the world does what it sets out to do - *ready or not* - it awakens us from sleep, enlivens us for service to the neighbors, frees us from fear and forgives us from the sin and evil that cling to us. Transformation is messy. Grace is uncomfortable most of the time.

Our Lord's sermon in the synagogue announces his mission and ministry. He passed through those who would hurl him from the cliff, but would go to the cross for them too. To paraphrase Jay Krall, my grandfather - *What did we ever do without [Jesus]*? He has done what God promised. He is the anointed one - who in the power of the Holy Spirit does what we cannot do. Who are we? We are His. That's who we are. By His death and resurrection we are welcomed into the embrace of abundant and eternal life, and called forth into lives of service, solidarity, generosity, and justice. His

life and light are in us now, and we carry the good news with us. We are receiving new sight, we live in the freedom Christ brings, and are released from our sin. Ready or not, we go to share this Word with our neighbors, our families, and a community in need. Amen.