

Sermon – Epiphany 4 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 4: 21-30

The gospel passage you just heard this morning is the second half of Luke's account of Jesus' first address to the worshippers at the local synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown. Last week if you remember we heard the account of Jesus reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, in what some consider was his inauguration speech. The prophecy from Isaiah was not only heard in the temple but Jesus claimed that it had been fulfilled that day in their hearing.

Jesus' ministry was firmly anchored in the past. He linked his ministry back to the time of God's foretelling of the future through the words and actions of the great prophets. He would go on to live out his promise of fulfillment of the prophecy by taking the good news to the poor, releasing the captives, recovering sight for the blind and letting the oppressed go free. His ministry was indeed a time of the Lord's favor.

The reaction to Jesus' reading of the text that day, and claim to fulfillment, was one of WOW! You can imagine the headline of the first century tabloid The Nazareth Post, 'Local boy makes good.' It is clear from Luke's account that Jesus impressed them because "they all spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words that came from his mouth." (v22)

Jesus could see through the thin veil of their compliments. Rather than bathe in the glory of a well-accepted speech, Jesus started to dismantle their pretentious stance. He fully understood that their real motivation in complimenting him was to encourage him demonstrate for them the miracles he'd preformed in Capernaum. His notoriety had preceded him across the region.

In Jesus retort to the temple attendees that day he drew on the actions of two great prophets of history to explain the real meaning of his ministry. He wasn't going to be tempted into performing for the crowd as a way to win them over. In fact Jesus goes the other way, metaphorically poking them. He gave them two examples of God acting for the outsider, the gentiles over the chosen Israelites.

Elijah found himself in the midst of a drought and famine, that he himself predicted as punishment for King Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, and his turning from God to Baal to please her. With no food or water God first sent Elijah to the desert, to live in a ravine, where he was fed by ravens and drank from a brook. When that time ended, God sent him from the desert east of the Jordan to the coastal town of Zarephath, about 60 miles northwest and to a widows house. Elijah found that he was in the hands of a gentile woman and far from home. Why this women, when Elijah probably passed hundreds of widows with whom he could have rested and been fed. She was an outsider.

Similarly Elisha, who succeeded Elijah as prophet, healed Naaman, a commander of the army of King of Aram. Naaman, a Syrian, expected Elisha to greet him personally when he came calling and to make a big deal about healing his leprosy. When Elisha sent a messenger to tell Naaman what he had to do to be cleansed he refused because he felt ignored. Eventually he relented and bathed in the Jordan River as was instructed and was cured.

These two accounts have a common thread. Two great prophets bring healing and support to a couple of rank outsiders. Both the widow and the army commander become firm believers in the God of Israel because of the prophets' actions. God had thrown a wide net to reach these outsiders because of the rejection of God by the favored Israelites.

When the members of the synagogue heard Jesus tell of these historical accounts they turned on him and wanted to throw him off a cliff. They were incensed that the miraculous work of God that they had been expecting through their hometown boy Jesus was not to be. They weren't to be the vessels for the unfolding of God's new narrative. Believing they were the insiders they now found themselves on the outside of God's new plan. This was for them, and is for us, an uncomfortable place to be.

God's plan for salvation includes everyone, no just those inside the church, or even those that call themselves Christian. God's plan is greater and grander than anything we can imagine. New God-directed narratives are unfolding all around us but we might not be attune to them nor to God's desire. God is unfolding these narratives through the particulars of outsiders, of what biblical commentator David Ostendorf calls "edge-people," who come to God and bear witness to God through God's actions in "edge-places," and occasionally in church settings.¹

For Elijah and Elisha the edge-places were deserts, ravines, struggling widows and dying sons, disbelieving people of power, and prophets living lives of faith in these places. Our edge-places might be the parks in our neighborhood, the armory on Bedford Ave, Atlantic Terminal, Pacific Park, the local coffee shop or the Atlantic Houses, wherever we might find widows, released prisoners, dying children, disbelieving people of power and the lost. We cannot confine God to our temples, to these beautiful houses of prayer and worship no matter how much we desire it. We are called to find the edge-places and connect with people there.

For us, we can be caught up in our common life worrying that we don't have enough money to pay the bills or people to provide enough stewardship income to sustain the ministry we desire. We can fret and be anxious but it won't change God's unfolding narrative. When we become consumed by these worries it is because we are focusing on the subject of concern and not the process of connecting with those on the outside.

It costs hardly anything to connect with other people. We connect with people all over the place and maybe it costs us a cup of coffee. So why would we allow money to be a barrier to helping people 'fall in love with Jesus,'² This wonderful phrase was coined by Fr. George Van DeWater, a former rector of St Luke's, who preached at the rededication of the church following the 1914 fire.

God's unfolding narrative for our faith community is, I believe, bound up in the changing of this neighborhood. Within a few years some 10,000 new residents will be residing in almost 20 new apartment buildings within 500' of our church. Within these same few years we will have

¹ The terms 'edge-places' and 'edge-people' are from Feasting on the Word commentary on Luke 4: 21-30 by David Ostendorf

² I found this phrase in a sermon preached by Rev Van der Water at the consecration of the Church of St Luke, our current building, in 1915. He had been the rector from 1880 to 1895.

managed to completely renovate the inside and outside of our church buildings. Nothing then should stand in the way of God's unfolding narrative except the limits of our love for connecting people with Jesus.

Our challenge is to connect with people in this neighborhood, say one person each, and give witness to our love for Jesus and our love for our faith community. If even half of them become curious and intrigued by our love and witness we would have made a big difference in their lives. They may want to join with us to explore their spirituality, to join in worship and give thanks with us and pray. They may seek baptism, or pastoral counseling about a troubling issue, or they may seek marriage here. We are here as the body of Christ and as a spiritual beacon for the community.

The work of the Holy Spirit is only limited by our actions and / or our lack of courage. Amazing connections and ministry could be just about to be revealed to us.

Many people are nostalgic for the 1950s church, the height of the popularity of the church in community. Also a lot of people see the church today as a failing institution. I don't and many others don't either. It's changing but not failing.

We stand on the cusp in this dense urban village of a renaissance as God works out God's plan through us. God is leading us to the other, to the edge-places, to those that crave love, justice and mercy and those that want to work for peace and a better world in a Christian context.

Today we will elect a new vestry and we will begin a new chapter in the life of the Church of St Luke and St Matthew, here in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. It will be the vestry's main task to prepare us for when the Holy Spirit sends us out to the edge-places like Elijah and Elisha to connect with those that live there.

Connection and the practice of radical welcome have to be the processes we focus on to ensure that those we reach feel welcomed and connected to Jesus first and to this holy place second, not just on Sundays but every day. I would love nothing more than to see the doors to the church open up every day, all day, with many small groups meeting to discuss aspects of life, faith and scripture, and for us to have a vibrant music and arts ministry. The challenge that awaits the new vestry is immense but for me, and hopefully you, extremely exciting. We are not alone in this work as we are the instruments of God's hands.

For those of you that are not called to leadership you too have a vital role to play in God's unfolding plan for us and our neighborhood. We need your prayers and we need you to support the outreach work of God's plan both practically and financially according to your means. None of us can do it alone or the hard work of ministry left to a few.

We are a community of faith that loves and serves the Lord Jesus and through our infectious love, will help others to fall in love with Jesus too.

Amen.