

3 Epiphany, Year C
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A friend seeking to be helpful sent me an instructive quotation about what makes for a good sermon. For a sermon to be truly extraordinary, it said, the sermon must have a good beginning ... and a good end, ... and these should be as close to each other as possible.

Judging from the account of his sermon in his hometown synagogue, Jesus got the memo. Jesus had returned to his hometown, entered the synagogue, read a short passage from Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, ... and then Jesus preached what is surely the shortest sermon on record: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's it. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The sermon was a huge hit. "All spoke well of him," the Gospel lesson says, and the popularity of his sermon probably had more to do with its substance than its brevity. Because what Jesus said very pointedly was that an extraordinary power had been sent to them.

Abundance of life, he said, is here, now. The misery of the poor is finished. Anybody who is weighed down and burdened by anxiety and guilt over something they've done or left undone – you're all free now. Any who have felt as if they are going through their lives groping in the darkness, trying to find a sense of direction or meaning or purpose – today, that is all over. The dayspring from on high has dawned upon you.

Today you are being offered a new life, he said. Nothing from the past has any power over you, even all your sins have been forgiven. As the prophet Isaiah would say elsewhere,

All you have to do is arise, shine, for your light has come.

The people of Nazareth liked this sermon. They liked it a lot. When he declared that the spirit of the Lord was in their midst and that they were all being offered an extraordinary new life from God, the people in Nazareth were thrilled.

But then Jesus went a little further. In the verses that come immediately after this Gospel lesson, Jesus told a couple of stories that got the hometown people upset. What he said was that God was pleased to use widows in Zarephath and lepers in Syria to do miraculous things; he said that these sinful outcasts were just as much instruments of God's grace in the world as anybody in his hometown.

That's when they got mad. It would be like Jesus saying that God is pleased to use Muslims from the Middle East and Episcopalians from New Hampshire to make God's glory known in the world. Folks don't handle surprises like that too well, we like a God

who conforms to our expectations and our personal understanding of the Bible. So, although they had just been speaking well of him, in the verses that follow this morning's lesson, the hometown people take Jesus to the brow of the hill near their city and try to throw Jesus off a cliff.

We Episcopalians are much more civilized than that, of course. When the preacher makes us mad, we just cut our pledge.

When I look around St. Stephen's today and listen to many of you tell me about your lives, I imagine Jesus saying that here today, Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in our hearing. Good news is coming to the poor in the form of mentors and other volunteers from this church to at-risk children in Richmond's East End. And just as important, people here in the West End who didn't even know they were blind are finally beginning to see, after we encounter people who have none of our material wealth but who are wealthy beyond comparison in matters of the soul. Those who were blind begin to see the materially poor and their own comparative material wealth in a new light.

Today we commission another medical mission to our friends in the Dominican Republic. Tomorrow, as on every Monday, parishioners will visit residents of Richmond's subsidized housing, and the fresh fruit our parishioners deliver to the poor is nothing compared to the nourishment they receive for their own souls.

Knitters of prayer shawls, dedicated volunteers in May Fair House, caring participants in weekly prayer groups and Bible studies, supportive youth groups, committed Sunday School volunteers, inspired musicians and choir, the list goes on, and more and more people who had simply given up on the church years ago are now finding their way back by way of our evening service which has grown so steadily in just a few months that it is now often the largest of all our services on any given Sunday,

When I look around St. Stephen's, I see Isaiah's prophecy of good news to the poor, release for captives, and sight for the blind all being fulfilled today in our hearing. But as the people of Nazareth remind us, bruised egos and prideful opinions can cause anyone to turn on God in a heartbeat and pursue a selfish, mob agenda if we're not spiritually disciplined.

It requires discipline, but the Christian life is pretty straightforward. Jesus didn't need a mission statement. Jesus simply proclaimed that a more abundant life and fuller freedom are real and available to everyone now, and we just need to start living as if we really believed it were true. We can think of it this way. In the midst of the Civil War, when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, slaves who lived in the realm of the confederacy were still captive. Lincoln proclaimed that a new reality was now in effect, but other powers denied the proclamation was true and so kept human beings in bondage.

This is how we can understand Jesus proclaiming that today, good news has come for the poor, captives are free and the blind can see. He is proclaiming a truth that is not fully

realized, because not all of us have started to live this way. But it is a truth nonetheless, and any church or individual who wants to live their life focusing on this truth is welcome. The good news is that we can get started today. Here today in our hearing, the spirit of the Lord is upon us, just as it was upon Jesus, and it is time to get started making Jesus' proclamation a reality in our personal lives, in our relationships with family and friends, and in the lives of people in Richmond, in the Dominican Republic, in South Africa, in the Middle East, ... wherever God beckons us.

Let your light shine. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, welcome the stranger, visit those who are in prison. And in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.

Like the people of Nazareth, there will always be a crowd somewhere that is up in arms about something. Religious people stray easily into the quagmire of their personal opinions and sense of self-importance. But there is simply too much work for us to do to allow such a crowd to drag the whole church to the brow of a hill and try to throw it off a cliff.

The Spirit is upon us, the kingdom and the power and the glory are available to us, and a life of miracles awaits us when we return to the revelation of Jesus' first sermon and realize that he was talking about us – today the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing.