



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JANUARY 31, 2016
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

All Eyes Are on You
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-30

“I don’t think I saw that coming!”

I imagine that is what the synagogue attendant said after the dust had settled, Jesus had left the village, and everyone else had finally calmed down and returned to their homes. The day had started nicely enough. The weather was mild, the sky clear and blue. The synagogue filled quickly once word spread that Jesus was back home and would speak. Although he had been away for a little while, everyone knew and admired Jesus. He was a good looking fellow, lean and strong and confident. He had always been popular in the village simply because he was so nice and attentive and industrious. And smart! Growing up, he often joined in conversations with the rabbis who taught in the synagogue. A lot of folks had expected him to become a disciple of one of the great rabbis in Jerusalem, but he had stayed in Nazareth, working and taking care of his family.

Months before he had gone with a group of other men from the village to the Jordan River to be baptized by that fellow John. The others had come back, but they said Jesus had gone off by himself. Lately they had heard that he was traveling from village to village teaching in the synagogues like a regular rabbi. Some people reported that he had healed people and performed other miracles. It was not surprising that a crowd had gathered to hear him speak and the excitement was high.

Everything was going well. The attendant handed Jesus the scroll of Isaiah, the prophetic reading for the day. Jesus read one of his favorite passages about God bringing good news to the poor, freedom for captives, new sight for the blind, and freedom from all oppression. He read about the Jubilee year when debts would be forgiven and land restored to its original owners, putting everyone on level ground. Although God had commanded the Jubilee year centuries ago, it had never been observed. Yet, Jesus talked as if it might actually happen and even indicated that he was the one to see that it did. People were smiling and nodding their heads, commenting on what a good speaker he was and how well he interpreted the scripture. Then everything blew up.

Jesus suggested that the villagers were jealous and interested only in his ability to perform miracles for them as he had in other towns. The people got restless. He cited a couple of examples of miracles from scripture, but they were about non-Jews and the people got mad. The congregation became a mob and hustled Jesus out to the edge of town and threatened to throw him off the cliff. Jesus said not a word but shrugged them off, nodded to his dumbfounded disciples, and walked out of town. No one saw that coming!

We tend to criticize the villagers for getting upset and turning violent, which they did. Yet, up to a point, everything was fine. Jesus' interpretation of the scripture was well received. These folks were, by and large, poor, so they were happy to get some good news. They were under the oppressive rule of the Roman government, so getting out from under Caesar's thumb would be a welcomed relief. They knew of people who had been put in jail for not complying with Roman laws, and they would be delighted to see them released. Because many of them knew how debt often led to selling family land and entering servitude to someone else, they looked forward to having a chance to get back on solid financial ground. It was all going so well. What happened?

They knew Jesus pretty well, but he also knew them. I think Jesus detected some complacency in their agreeable nature. They desperately wanted to hear good news, but did they want to hear all of the news? He knew how his people clung to their designation as God's chosen people. One day they would get their due, they believed, and other nations would get what was coming to them. He knew what they thought about the Samaritans, their neighbor-cousins to the north, and how they treated them. He knew they thought that God was theirs and theirs alone and had forgotten that it was they who actually belonged to God. He knew that if some of them regained wealth or freedom or self-respect, they were not likely to pass it on to others who were indebted to them. He knew that grace does not generally trickle-down.

Jesus decided to shake things up a bit. He accused them of being a bit jealous because he had worked wonders in other villages but not in his own hometown. He reminded them that no prophet is welcome among his own people. And he used examples of two of their beloved prophets—Elijah and Elisha—to point out that God is not limited by national boundaries but will be gracious to whomever he will, including widows in Sidon and lepers in Syria. It worked! He shook things up so much that he nearly ended up at the bottom

of a cliff! This time he escaped unharmed but it was a foreshadowing of the day when he would not escape the wrath of the people.

Luke tells us that “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” Jesus, however, let the people know that God was watching them and, just as he had his eye on the sparrow, he had his eye on all his children across the world, like it or not.

I don't know if the impact of this story is quite what it was a couple of thousand years ago, even a hundred years ago. I think that most of us, hearing Jesus' words, agree with him—even to the extent of understanding that we are not the only people God watches over. We want the poor to get good news and be more financially stable. We want to see justice done and for innocent people to be free. We detest oppression wherever it exists in our world, we desperately want those who are ill to be healed. We are not quite sure how a jubilee year would work but we believe in giving all people an equal opportunity to live a good life. We don't favor name calling and hypocrisy. We decry prejudice and bigotry. We believe “Jesus loves [all] the little children of the world.”

Nevertheless, I do think God has his eye on us. We have to ask ourselves whether or not we believe the Good News is news for everyone. Everyone. We know it is for people in our country, even people who are quite different from us, but we need to remember that to the early Christians, we are the outsiders. We are not the people to whom Jesus first came. Nevertheless, do we believe the Good News is really news for everyone? Do we believe that the Gospel is intended for members of ISIS who are intent on doing us harm? If so, what does that mean for our strategy to defeat them? Do we believe that the Gospel is for the less than 1% of the people who possess over 90% of the wealth in our country? If so, what does it mean for our relationships with them and their sources of income? Do we believe that the Gospel is for the young men on the other side of town who do not fear death but are frightened out of their wits by life? If so, what does that mean for us as their neighbors? Do we believe that the Gospel is for every person whose politics, philosophy, religion, culture, and attitude are antithetical to our own? If so, what does that mean for the ways in which we think about and relate to one another? Do we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for us? If so, what does that mean for the ways we think about ourselves and deny the goodness of God that is inherent in each of us?

After Jesus walked away from his neighbors-turned-lynch mob, I imagine they shouted after him for a minute or two and then stood in silence, looking at their feet, angry and ashamed, wondering what in the world had just happened. And I wonder what they did the next time they saw Mary at the village well or in the synagogue or at the market. It was Jesus' fault, after all. He stirred the nest and out came a swarm of angry hornets. It was his own doing, but then again, so were his birth and death and resurrection.

Sometimes God in Christ stirs things up a bit to make us think. Sometimes Jesus pokes us to make certain we are awake and attentive to what is going on in the world. Sometimes Jesus shocks us to make us reconsider how we think and how we act. Sometimes God hits nerve so that we will pay attention to the source of that pain. Sometimes God wants to remind us that he has his eye on us so that we will keep our eyes on him in order to follow him wherever he leads.

From time to time, some of you ask me for suggestions about devotional books or spiritual practices that might be helpful as you grow in faith. I know of no better spiritual exercise at this time than to immerse yourself in the current presidential campaign. That sounds crazy, I know, but I encourage you to listen to the speeches, debates, and interviews that are taking place with all of the candidates. Listen to the commentators and political hacks. In one way or another, they will touch on every issue about which Jesus was concerned. Listen carefully to what they say and don't say, ask yourself what the Good News has to say to particular issues. Are we seeking freedom from oppression, new sight from our blindness, relief for the poor, and justice for all people? I am not suggesting that one party or another is carrying the banner of Christ because, honestly, they are not. Nor am I suggesting that you should vote for a particular candidate or party based on the religious talk you hear. Personally, I think they are all off-base if they are trying to emulate Jesus during this election cycle. Pay attention and use the issues and ideas to reflect on what Jesus would say or do about those concerns. How do our attitudes and our politics square with the Gospel Jesus came to live out? It is a challenging way to explore our faith.

Do we believe that Jesus is the One who will bring God's Good News to bear in the world? If so, what does that mean for us as followers of this pot-stirring, trouble-making, Savior of the world who has his eye on us? Keep your eyes focused on Jesus and you will see the world in a clearer, different light. Amen.

January 31, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Mighty God of Mercy, we thank you for the resurrection dawn bringing the glory of our risen Lord who makes every day new. Especially we thank you for the beauty of your creation, the new creation in Christ, and all gifts of healing and forgiveness, for the sustaining love of family and friends, and the fellowship of faith in your church. Merciful God, renew this weary world, heal the hurts of all your children, and bring about your peace for all in Christ Jesus. Especially we pray for those who govern nations of the world, the people of countries where there is strife or warfare, for all who work for peace and harmony, and for the church of Jesus Christ in every land.

Dear God, we have mentioned those among us this morning and we pray for them in a particular way. We ask that you be near them even now. May they sense your presence, feel your power, may they know your love, and may their body, heart and mind be overwhelmed with light and truth, with healing and wellness. Thank you for hearing our prayers, O God, and for the assurance that you hold all heaven and earth in your loving hands.

We pray for justice for all people. For those who feel forgotten and hopeless, we ask for comfort. Where children lie abandoned or abused, we pray for protection. Where communities suffer at the hands of prejudice, we ask for healing of hearts and minds. Lord, we pray for a mighty downpour from Heaven. May your sons and daughters hear your voice with understanding so that we may live as you lead us to live, and give as you teach us to give. Keep us ever mindful of the needs of others, especially persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy.

Grant these request, dear Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Amy Shortt
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