

“Rage, Madness, and Attempted Murder in Nazareth!”

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Scriptures: Luke 4:21- 32

He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture has come true as you listen."

And they all began voicing approval of him, and marveling at the pleasing speech that he delivered; and would remark, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

And he said to them, "No doubt you will quote me that proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you'll tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard you've done in Capernaum.'"

Then he said, "The truth is, no prophet is welcomed on his home turf. I can assure you there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the sky was damned up three and half years, and a severe famine swept through the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but instead to a widow in Zarephath near Sidon. In addition, there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; yet none of them was made clean, except Naaman the Syrian."

Everyone in the synagogue was filled with rage when they heard this. They rose up, ran him out of town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, intending to hurl him over the cliff. But he slipped away through the mob and went on his way.

He went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and would teach them on the sabbath day. They were astonished at his teaching because his message carried the weight of authority.

Sermon:

In today's reading we come across the first recorded attempt on Jesus' life. And it started in a synagogue no less, a place of worship, that was packed to the gills, to hear the "local boy makes good," regional celebrity, preacher and miracle worker.

In a matter of minutes, however, it seemed the synagogue crowd goes from busting with pride over their native son's oratory to wanting to toss him over a cliff.

Wow, what a homecoming!?

My how quickly things can change!

What exactly did Jesus do or say that ended up causing his audience, at least to go over the proverbial cliff in rage?

How did adoration by the crowd so quickly turn into mob violence?

It certainly brings into fresh context another often quoted line by Jesus, "Be careful when people speak well of you..."

Now last Sunday I talked about the verses leading up to this, where Jesus returned home, fresh from 40 days in the desert. When he entered the Nazareth synagogue, as an honored guest this time, he was handed the scroll to read that day's scripture.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to announce pardon for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's amnesty!"

This passage has also been referred to by some as Jesus' inaugural address.

Publicly he now declares his mission,

"I am anointed with the Lord's spirit"

(or simply set apart to perform a special task for God),

to *"bring good news to the poor"* (which is often translated poorly as *"preach"* since the word *"bring"* includes more than just words!), *"and recovery of sight to the blind"* (both for those eyes that cannot see and for those that refuse to see!)

"to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's amnesty!"

(which is often interpreted by scholars as a call to practice the Year of Jubilee or the post Exodus instruction by God where all debts were forgiven, all land was to be returned to its original owner and all slaves were freed!).

Quite a bold and daring set of initiatives wouldn't you say?

And no doubt, not very popular with the bankers, and those who owned lots of land and/or slaves.

Now last Sunday I went into some detail about how Jesus left the crowd hanging, or "riveted" as one version called it, not so much on what he said but for what he did not say.

Because in that passage from Isaiah 61 verse two also includes the promise of God's vengeance on Israel's enemies.

He should have read, *"...to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God..."*

But Jesus was not only taking up the prophet Isaiah's agenda, he was now proclaiming that this vision of a new world will happen not through vengeance and violence but through the truly radical way of nonviolent service and suffering love!

All he can add to this then was the fact that through him this vision can now be fulfilled!

And that is where we started this morning's reading,
*"Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture
has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"*

Now last Sunday I may have been a bit out of line when I stated
so authoritatively, that those nine words
constituted the entirety of his sermon.

Partly this was due to how varying versions translate the passage.
But given the version we read today, *"He began by saying to them..."*
it sounds like this might have been merely his intro.

And then, after a rather long and perhaps discomfoting pause,
where those in attendance, began at first to mumble in agreement
and praise for their native son, they then began to actually question
the source of this young man's authority, especially
as it became clear to them just exactly what he was saying.

Jesus' breaks the silence with a curious comment, *"Doctor, cure yourself,"*
which would have been a common saying even in his day.

And of course it is certainly still a wise reminder
to all of us in our day to avoid becoming hypocrites!

But sometimes we can also use the saying in a less honorable fashion
in order to either discount the good doctor's advice
or in order to ignore that helpful advice altogether.

In the Gospel of Thomas, a first century Coptic writing and close
challenger to the canonical Gospels, has a similar saying,
*"Jesus said, 'No prophet is welcome on his home turf;
doctors don't cure those who know them.'" Gospel of Thomas 31:1-2*

"Familiarity," as we often similarly say, *"breeds contempt."*
Hypocrisy is definitely something to be avoided but so too
is the temptation to ignore the often difficult truth that we may need
to radically change both our perspectives and our actions!

But Jesus then continued to say aloud
what was likely being mumbled by the crowd,
Do here in your hometown what we've heard you've done in Capernaum.

Aah, sounds like someone's feelings might have been hurt?

But what I really find more curious about this comment is the fact That, up until now, Luke has not included anything about what Jesus was up to in Capernaum?! He did, as we read already, go directly to Capernaum, following that “close call” in Nazareth.

Either the author has left out some details, or perhaps was banking on some common understandings by a much later audience of readers.

But the “author” Luke was quite clear throughout his story that Jesus had to be thoroughly rejected by his own people, All the way from the religious authorities at the top, as well as the religious nationalists and all the way down to the simple folks from his hometown.

Central to Luke, especially in his second volume, which we call the “Acts of the Apostles” was the juxtaposition of this wholesale rejection and the subsequent nearly universal acceptance of Jesus’ message by those on the outside - or the Gentiles.

But Jesus continued to add insult to injury by selectively choosing two stories from Israel's history that included two internally maligned groups, widows and lepers, and two prophets who had been specifically instructed to seek out faithful folks who were outside the Jewish fold.

Elijah’s words of truth were directed at his own nation’s evil. He preached the necessity of their repentance and when they refused, famine gripped the land. Well you know what likely happened then, King Ahab fell into a rage against Elijah, causing Elijah to flee to a neighboring country where he found refuge in the home of a poor widow.

He met her, we are told, as she was gathering firewood in order to cook what meager food she had left for her and her son. But because she fed the stranger in her midst instead, their simple box meal and skin of oil never ran dry during the famine. When King Ahab finally dies, Elijah returned to Israel, rested, ready and well fed, preaching the fiery message of justice for the poor!

And when the great Elijah was taken up by the clouds into heaven Elisha assumed both his mantle and staff and followed in his footsteps. Again. the nation was beset by numerous foreign enemies. One of those was Syria led by the great warrior, Naaman.

But as great as he was, he was also afflicted by a certain skin infection. This not only led to great personal and public embarrassment, but likely also made it difficult to wear that armor which was essential to his profession as a blood thirsty conqueror of other nations.

But God talked to this ruthless foreigner, instructing him to meet Elisha (which he did I might add without hesitation or complaint!). God also instructed Elisha much the same thing, (which I might add Elisha does only reluctantly and with lots of complaints!).

Naaman does balk at first when instructed by Elisha to bathe in the muddy water of the Jordan River. But he relented, not because he heard the voice of God, or due to the great prophet's pleading, but through the encouragement of one of his servants. Miraculously cured Naaman returned to Syria a happy man and no longer desirous of invading his weaker neighbor Israel.

Both are great stories with far more fascinating details, but the point Jesus was making to his audience was that God had sent them specifically to heal and save foreigners.

Both had been sent to and/or found sanctuary with their enemies and Jesus was harshly reminding those in attendance that the wonderful promises of Isaiah's vision were also intended for everyone, even enemies considered deserving of God's vengeance!

Now I don't know about you, but Jesus seems to come across as a bit confrontational here?

Was he intentionally trying to tick off his listeners? Hmm... well he definitely, "hit a nerve," as they say one that literally got him carried away.

Jesus believed, acted and preached radical inclusion and for that he was considered a traitor deserving punishment of death!

But there's nothing really new here, since history is filled with horrific instances of enraged mobs who beat, torture, lock up, malign and yes even kill the messengers that bring us inconvenient and unwanted truths.

Rage does lead to madness that not only can kill the "outsider" but even honor such deeds as honorable and righteous.

Rage is a very dangerous drug!
Rage and a mob are a most deadly combination.
A perceived insult or implied threat to my people, nation, or religion,
or an often repeated yet baseless threat to our safety
or the potential loss of something we feel that we deserve,

once affirmed by the mob, can easily lead to serious stuff, such as;
lynchings, and burning Anabaptist heretics at the stake,
or separating infants from their parents and crucifixions!

It's Black history month and so we have a relevant and recent reminder.
MLK was often harshly accused, (by whites mostly),
of actually inciting the violence that fell upon
those working for civil rights.

King was firm and clear in his response
that the non-violent strategy was merely exposing
the horrible violence already present in the segregated south.

Bull Conner, and other sheriffs like him, as well as some Governors
did have a choice he stressed, not to use clubs and firehoses.
The fact that those in power failed to institute social reforms
or to reign in those who were violent was not his fault, but theirs.
The fact that violence against the civil rights movement escalated
as the movement grew only further exposed the depth
and potency of rage in the souls of those who felt threatened.

Rage is a demon and it must be exorcised.
Healing can come and the hole left by its extrusion can be filled.
The scars can heal but they can also become a lasting testament/testimony,
to the power of God and the power of love!
And the contorted and destructive energies that were once given to fuel it
can equally become focused upon doing that which is good!
You see the fires of rage will eventually burn out
and fizzle as quickly as they erupted.

Yes, they do seem to simmer and are fed from time to time
but eventually they will consume even those who seek to feed it.
But the fire of love, compassion and justice are fed from a Divine source
an existential force not reliant on mere humans to sustain.
And as Dr. King told us, at times it may appear that the forces of rage
are winning, but they will not, they cannot win in the end.
Cause in the end it will be Love that wins!
In the end God's desires will prevail!

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