

Primary Text: Luke 4.21-30

I received an email this week and the message printed at the bottom of the email read as follows...

God whispers in your soul and speaks to your mind. Sometimes when you don't have time to listen, God has to throw a brick at you. It's your choice: Listen to the whisper, or wait for the brick.

I'm not so sure about God ever resorting to throwing bricks, but I do wonder if often God speaks to us in a quiet whisper... And I also wonder if God's words fills our ears so often with such familiar voices that it's easy to tune out. The prophetic whisper of God comes to us through hometown friends and family, children, young adults, adults, and our elders.

The Gospel reading from Luke for today is a story about a prophetic word being spoken from a familiar face – Jesus having been in his hometown of Nazareth. But the story that's printed in our bulletins today is really the second part of a single story. The first part of the story was the Gospel reading for last week, so listen with me as we remind ourselves how the story went...

Fresh from the wilderness and filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returns to Galilee (his home region) where he begins to teach in the synagogues and is being praised by everyone. When he gets to his hometown of Nazareth, he goes to worship just as is expected. And they ask Jesus to read, sort of like a college student who's come home recruited to be on 'Care & Serve'. So they hand Jesus the Isaiah scroll and he opens it up to the place where it's written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of the sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And Jesus rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and sits down.

And Luke tells us then that *the eyes of all who had gathered there to worship were fixed on Jesus. And then Jesus begins to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

That’s where we left off last week and where we pick up this week. This week the story begins that *all the people there spoke well of him*. You have to wonder if they spoke well of him, because they assumed that Jesus had just given the shortest sermon ever preached in Nazareth, just as some might have thought I was going to preach the shortest sermon ever preached in Custer.

I think it’s more likely that the folks of Nazareth spoke well of Jesus, because they understood Jesus’ prophetic words to mean that God’s “Anointed One” – in Hebrew, *The Messiah* – was there. Now. Jesus was announcing that the *Kingdom of God* was in their midst, NOW. That with the presence of the *Messiah*, the *Messianic Age* had begun NOW, IN THEIR MIDST...

And they probably spoke well of Jesus, because they imagined the *Kingdom of God* was going to start with **them** in **their** worshipping community. They believed the riches, the benefits, the center of this new empire – God’s empire – was going to start with and benefit them. But it seems that the prophetic whispers of God were blowing in other directions.

At a committee meeting this week, folks were remarking how challenging it can be to get people to get up from their seats, take their dishes to the kitchen, and go to worship. We were observing that there’s this sort of crowd, almost a herd mentality. And if there’s no signal to rouse people from their fellowship and conversation, worship could begin and people would continue to sit in the fellowship hall.

I wonder if the prophetic whispers of God are a little like the bell that gets rung on Wednesday nights 5 minutes before worship. The bell is intended to announce that something new is going to start. The prophetic whispers of God often remind us that *God’s Empire* is breaking into our lives and our world. And strangely, mysteriously *God’s Empire* usually breaks in to our world at the places most broken, it usually radiates from the places we consider the fringes like ripples in reverse.

I understand that the confirmation class this past week discussed with Pastor Dave about listening to sermons and trying to discern Law & Gospel in the scripture and in the sermon. I think I heard that you even looked at this very reading from Luke. I don't know about you, but I'm simply baffled by how the story progresses. And frankly, I have to admit that I'm baffled as well by preaching sermons. This story and life are at once both intensely complex and simple – how does one convey that in a sermon? How does one convey that I'm not ok and you're not ok, but that's ok? How does one convey God's love in the midst of a painful world? In this way, the story is a little bit like life – so quickly the gracious words, the simple acclamation for Jesus (hometown-boy-done-well) turn to a complex rage.

Life happens like this at times. We're moving along the simple path of life and all is well. And suddenly, with a simple diagnosis or a car accident or even a misspoken word, we look around and the simple path has turned into a complex forest of misunderstanding, anger, sadness, rage, depression, confusion. I don't know about you, but I'm lucky if my week includes more simple path days than complex forest days.

But what's the catalyst for this mob? In the story it seems to take just two simple stories involving two familiar prophets: Elijah and Elisha. Jesus simply says:

There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah...yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon... There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet of Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian...

“Widows and lepers?” the congregation in Nazareth asks. “What do they have to do with the *Kingdom of God*?” “Zarephath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian?” the congregation in Nazareth asks. “What do folks from *Sidon* and *Syria* have to do with the *Kingdom of God*?”

“People with HIV and folks working minimum wage jobs? What do they have to do with the *Kingdom of God*?” we still ask today. “Shi'ites and Sunnis, Palestinians, Israelis, or folks that go to one of the churches in Custer, or folks that live around Custer that don't go to church at all?” we ask, “what do *those* ethnic groups, what do *those* families and communities have to do with the *God's Empire*?”

And the only sense that I can make out of these church-going folks turned mob is that, Jesus reveals to them the intersection of Law & Gospel at once – help the poor, release the captives, let the blind have sight, let the oppressed go free. Jesus reveals the simplicity and the complexity of *God's Empire* – so much more simple and so much more complex than anything the world has to offer and it's simply too much for their hearts to bear.

It's like the scene in when the *Grinch Stole Christmas* where the Grinch's heart grows five times its dwarfed size and bursts out of its boundaries with sounds of springs busting. It's like the scene in the movie *American Beauty* where the high school boy explains that sometimes he just can't take it because there is so much love in this world it makes his heart ache.

It's like these church-going folks turned mob hadn't read our lesson on *love* from Corinthians for today? “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way... Love does not take the *Messiah* to the edge of town and attempt to throw that *Messiah* from Calamity Peak!” (You might notice that's kind of a loose translation of mine).

The whispering prophetic words of God are the seeds for *God's Empire of Love* and they fill our lives day in and day out. And the prophetic words of God get louder, easier to discern, when we practice love, and when we admit that I'm not ok and you're not ok, but that's ok...

that our lives are **impoverished** no matter what mutual funds we have OR how much credit card debt we have...

that we in the pews are just as imprisoned by addictions as anyone at the state penitentiary, we're just fortunate that our society doesn't throw folks in jail for the types of addictions that we have (like work-aholism)...

that those of us with 20/20 vision are just as blind to *God's prophetic word* breaking into our world and leading us through the complex forest of emotions...

We try so hard to drive out of town the whispering prophetic words of God that remind us of our brokenness. But the ultimate goal of knowing we are broken isn't to make us feel guilty or angry or sad. The prophetic word of God is Law & Gospel –reminding us of our imprisonment and our blindness – AND reminding us that if we want to guess where *God's Empire of Love* will probably start, we should probably look to those broken, imprisoned, blind spots of our lives and in the world. Amen.