

Epiphany 4C 2019, Luke 4:21-30, February 3, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

I remember the first sermon I preached in my home congregation. Actually, come to think of it, the one I really remember was my second. The first happened on a Sunday when all the youth of the congregation led different parts of the liturgy. I'm pretty sure I delivered the sermon that day, but it could have been me with a couple of other of the youth. I'm not really sure. But the one I remember was my second. I had just finished my first year in seminary, and the pastor of my home congregation, Pastor James Shannon of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Lititz, invited me to preach. I had preached before; a couple of congregations in college near McKelevey's Fort north of State College and my field education congregation in Mechanicsburg. But this was the first time as an official candidate for ordained ministry that I stood in the pulpit in the congregation I grew up in. We moved to Lititz when I was in third grade, and my parents immediately became active at St. Paul's. I went to Sunday School there, joined Boy Scout Troop 44 sponsored by the congregation, three years of confirmation class, first communion on Palm Sunday the day I was confirmed, youth group all through high school, summer camp at Mount Luther in Mifflinburg, the very first acolyte in the new church built in 1969 on Orange Street. Throughout that time my parents served on church committees and council, my father was the treasurer for a while. I was a real church nerd growing up.

You may think I'm building all this up because something dramatic happened when I preached that sermon. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but it didn't. People filed out of church shaking my hand, telling me things like, "you've come a long way since I had you Sunday School in 5th grade," or "your parents sure are proud of you," or "you speak so well, I can hear everything you say." That last comment was only true because I played Colonel Hugh Pickering in my high school's production of *My Fair Lady*. This was before actors used wireless microphones on stage and my director, Mrs. Kufroth, always told us we needed to be speaking to the person in the back row of the auditorium. No, I didn't rile up the good folks at St. Paul, Lititz, that day. They didn't want to hurl rocks at me or throw me off a cliff like they did Jesus on that day he preached his first sermon at his home congregation.

It didn't start out that with Jesus though. At first the good folks of Nazareth thought he preached a great sermon. "They spoke well of him," Luke our gospel writer tells us, "and were amazed at his gracious words." By "gracious words" Luke means more than Jesus spoke warmly or invitingly. They heard real words of God's grace when he preached. Remember the text of his sermon from last week? Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah who said the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to

preach good news to the poor, release for captives, sight to the blind, the year of the Lord's favor. They heard these as words for them. Words full of grace and promise. God is now here bringing liberation, freedom, hope. Yes, they heard grace for themselves. Grace had come to Nazareth, and even though Jesus was the hometown boy made good, they still heard those gracious words.

But Jesus must have sensed something going on among the folks in Nazareth. Even though they heard grace for themselves Jesus decided to push the issue a bit further. He quotes a proverb about a doctor curing himself, and realizes that people want to see the healings he's performed elsewhere in his own town. He then goes on and tells a couple of other Bible stories that weren't in the lectionary of readings that day. These were about two of the greatest prophets in Israel's history; Elijah and Elisha. He picks out two episodes in each of their lives in which they performed miracles. But in each case the miracles happened to people outside of Israel. The widow at Zaraphath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian general were both pagans, both outside the covenant God made with his people.

Why was the reaction so swift and so violent, you may well wonder? Jesus just blinded them with grace. He's saying that the grace you hear for yourselves, about liberation and good news for the poor and the year of God's favor, is not just for you. It's also for others. For those who are outside the covenant. Jesus is saying he's the kind of prophet God is sending to all people. To Israel, yes. But also to Syrians and widows in Sidon, and eventually Greeks and Romans, and Egyptians, and Visigoths in Germany and Celts in Ireland and across oceans and continents until all the world will hear of God's grace and favor.

Blinded by grace was too much for the people of Nazareth. Too much for other people meant not enough for themselves, I guess. Or maybe it wasn't really about quantity, but about control. The Nazarenes believed they had a monopoly on grace. It belonged exclusively to them. So they became blind to how God is going to work in the world through Jesus his Son. They saw him as one of their own, but only their own.

Their blindness to grace is judgment they bring upon themselves. It's one of the hardest parts of the Bible for me. Seeing how some respond to God's grace with anger and an obstinate refusal to embrace it. But we see it time and again, in spite of the fact that this God's own Son among them, proclaiming and demonstrating the depth of this grace.

We love God's grace when it's for us. We take comfort and hope in the declaration of forgiveness. We find purpose and meaning in belonging to a community of sinners who are redeemed by God's grace. But are there ever times we resent when that grace goes beyond our expectations and is extended to those who we somehow believe aren't really deserving of it? Are there those we believe

should always stand outside God's forgiveness? Those who can never do enough to atone for their past sins?

This gospel reading, in my mind, asks more questions than it gives answers. The people of Nazareth don't fare very well. They grow so irate they rise up as a single mob and try to throw Jesus, of all people, off a cliff. Their hometown hero, the one they knew growing up in Joseph's carpenter shop. They bring this judgment on themselves because they are blinded by the grace Jesus shows them, but also shows others outside the covenant community.

In the end there's a small glimmer of hope. Jesus somehow escapes their wrath. "He passed through the midst of them and went on his way." Luke, who is a masterful storyteller, is making an allusion here. He's foreshadowing another event in Jesus' life, a similar event, when Jesus will encounter a crowd of people who initially receive him joyfully, but then quickly turn angry and seek to kill him. Yes, that's Palm Sunday and the week following. When Jesus enters Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna" and then the mob turns to shout "Crucify him!" Jesus will go to the cross where he will reconcile this angry, hostile, indifferent, world to God. Luke is pointing us to the cross where the whole world will be bathed in grace. Even in the midst of this story of hostility, anger, and resentment that there are others who simply don't deserve it, there is still hope, for them, for the world, and for us to see that God's grace is for everyone, and no one is to be left out. Amen.