

Sermon for January 23, 2022—“Afflicted”

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year C—Texts: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:21-30

A preacher’s young daughter had noticed that her father always bowed his head, and closed his eyes for a few seconds before he went to the pulpit to preach. When she asks him why he did that, he explained, “I’m asking God to help me preach a good sermon.” His daughter thought about it for a minute, and said, “Well daddy, why doesn’t he do it?”

Next Sunday, after church, a woman met the pastor at the door, and went on and on in her praise. “That sermon,” she exclaimed, “was one of the most wonderful I’ve ever heard!” The humble pastor couldn’t accept such a great compliment. “Oh, it really wasn’t me,” he said, “it was all the Lord.” “Oh, no,” she quickly assured him, “it wasn’t that good.”

My preaching professor in seminary told our class something that most preachers have known for a long time. Which is that in our preaching we’re to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comforted. It’s an adage based on a quote by Reinhold Niebuhr, which appears to have been based on a quote by Finley Peter Dunne, believe it or not, about newspapers.

Why do I mention it? Well, it’s because in our gospel reading this morning, our comfort—unfortunately—is afflicted. At least—it should be. How so? Well because while the good news of the Gospel is largely meant to comfort the afflicted, today the comfortable are challenged—by Jesus—to change. I know, hard to believe, right? Jesus is challenging us. How about that!? So—what exactly is going on here? Glad you asked—it’s simply this: That as we work and strive to find our place in the world, as well as our place in the pews, all that is being overturned by Jesus—as he puts it—in our hearing.

In the first part of our reading, we find Jesus in the Nazareth Synagogue. Something, we’re told, he did often. He stands before those gathered—and I have to believe the place was packed to overflowing—and boldly proclaimed that the Spirit of God had anointed him to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and forgiveness of debts in the Jubilee year.

After he says all this, Jesus sits down, which is how they preached in those days, and boldly announces: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” No big deal right? Well...not at first. After hearing Jesus’ nice sermon the people are amazed. What’s more, they’re comforted as they sit on cushy seats in the Nazareth synagogue.

They marvel that here, Joseph the carpenter’s son, has such beautiful words. They imagine beautiful scenes of their lives being eased, of the burdens laid down, and their bumps and bruises soothed. And this from one of our own—we’re all going to heaven now!

Can’t you almost hear them: “Me and Jesus? Oh yeah—we go way back! He’s my homeboy!” “I always said he’d do us proud!” “We were bar mitzvahed together! “I remember when we...yadda, yadda, yadda.” They’d brag to each other recalling some random encounter when Jesus was a boy, acting as if they’d known him all his life. But this is NOT the sermon that Jesus is preaching. And He tells them so. He has **not** come home, as it were, so that his friends and family can feel all warm and fuzzy.

Jesus has come to preach about real suffering, about real change, and about real people. Jesus comes down on the people in that synagogue, and he comes down pretty hard. He's come to preach the good news to them. But all they can see is kid he used to be, playing with the other boys, and helping out in his father's carpentry shop. They can't see that Jesus isn't Joseph's son at all. And this is why Jesus comes down hard. Well, that and the fact that Jesus remembers them as well.

You see, he's confronting their complacency, confronting their understanding of the world, what it means to be God's people, and he's using strong, bold words, words from Scripture—prophetic words, no less—to do it. He reminded them how God provided food for the widow through Elijah. How God healed Naaman from leprosy in the Jordan river, just as Elisha said would happen. Jesus reminds the people of their own history, of the prophets who'd already come to bring good news.

But he also reminded them of the facts of these stories they'd likely forgotten. The widow that God fed through Elijah? A gentile. A pagan. And Naaman? Whom God healed through Elisha in the Jordan? A foreigner. A Syrian. A soldier and a conqueror. Jesus reminds the comfortable folks of Nazareth, his former neighbors, of some **un**comfortable facts. That God sends prophets to heal outcasts and sinners, gentiles and the unclean, and that the Messiah has **not** come to make anyone's life easier.

Here's a question—maybe THE question: If Jesus were preaching here today, do you think he's challenge us too? Do you think he'd remind us of our calling as a church? Our responsibility to those he called, "...the least of these"? Do you think he'd remind us that healing and reconciliation is for all, not just for those we deem worthy? You better believe it, what's more he'd do so in no uncertain terms.

You see, when Jesus afflicts the comfortable he doesn't go halfway. Jesus did nothing halfway. Jesus challenges the people of the Nazareth—and us—to see where, in our hearing, God is already at work. What Jesus is saying is that God's work happens, 1) with more kinds of people than we can imagine, and 2) that it happens with us, among us, and—best of all—through us. All of us.

You see, God's work, according to Jesus, demands **our** participation. Jesus dares us—triple dog dares us—to find our place in that work, where our talents and gifts are most needed, the one's he's given us through the Holy Spirit, to find where our great joy meets the world's great need. Right here. Right now.

Does this poke us in our comfort zone, even if just a little? Does it make us defensive? I mean, c'mon, we're the ones already here. We're doing stuff...aren't we aren't we? Yes we are. Okay—so what more does God want from us? Well, I'll start by saying that I don't think it's about us doing **more**, as it is about us doing things **differently**.

Think about it: Are we the same people we were five years ago? Ten years ago? Twenty? Fifty? Probably not. Has the world stayed the same? Definitely not. What about the church? That's a tougher question because while Westwood, and everything around us changed, we've largely stood pat.

So, I believe that if we want to be a church that really makes a difference, if we have any designs of actively engaging the world around us, of becoming a more relevant presence in our community, we're going to have to wake up, and smell the new possibilities, and be open to new opportunities. I'm talking about new partnerships within our community. I'm talking about working alongside people that we might never have considered working alongside, doing things it might never have occurred to us to do. I'm talking about ministry with and for people we wouldn't normally touch with a ten-foot pole.

This is pretty much what Jesus is trying to tell the people of Nazareth, but this is definitely not what they came to hear. He's afflicting their comfort, and they get more than a bit ticked off, to the point where they even try to try to toss Jesus off a cliff. But he escapes—for the moment. Eventually, the peoples' rage will catch up with him, because the rage of the Nazarenes is the same rage that will one day shout "crucify him." But that time is not yet. Resurrection is still coming, make no mistake. And the people of Nazareth haven't yet seen the fulfillment of God's promises yet—promises that include more than the Jewish people, and Westside Presbyterians.

Our is a God who of new beginnings, whose mercies are new every morning, capable of transforming all things, and all people. And even though God does not change, change is a constant in the Bible—in the early Church in particular. This is an undeniable fact. Yet even in the face of all this change, the one constant, the one thing God's people could rely on, was the presence and providence of God. So I wonder then—why is it that the more we talk about change here in the church the less comfortable we become?

If we cannot trust our future to God what are we doing? Why are we even here? I believe it was pastor Rick Warren who said that "God is more concerned about our character than our comfort." So while our comfort may have been afflicted this morning, it's still Good News, and it's been fulfilled in our hearing!

We've been reminded that God's love is so much broader and deeper, so much more inclusive than we can possibly imagine. The Kingdom of God is coming, it's already happening. Today. It's happening whether we're on board with it or not, whether we're comfortable with it or not. But guess what? We're being offered front row seats. Today.

In closing, I offer this from Diana Butler Bass, author, theologian, and church expert, who writes this about our Gospel reading:

"Living in God's promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah, and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about now. This is a hard truth to hear and receive. Jesus' friends refused. They would rather stay mired in nostalgia, and complain about the future, 'How great the prophets were! If only a savior would appear, and get us out of this mess!' But Jesus' sermon remains as clear, as poignant, as important, and as urgent as ever: 'Today this promise has been fulfilled in your hearing,' what we need is here. Today."

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.