

**The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**January 31, 2010**  
**St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Boerne, Texas**  
**David M. Evans, Interim Pastor**

**Enjoyed the Sermon!**

The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus came home to preach in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. At first, the local boy made good made chests swell with pride. Then there was an abrupt change in the mood of the congregation. They were deeply appreciative one moment. And moved to murderous hostility the next. What provoked this change in mood? Hear the Word of God as it is recorded in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of Luke:

**Luke 4:21-30**

Next Sunday is Super Bowl Sunday, and many of you, like my wife Linda, will watch. She could care less about the game and I would bet good money that she could not even tell you who is playing. But she loves the commercials. Do you remember the Super Bowl commercial several years ago that shows an appropriately robed young preacher standing in an imposing pulpit before what could easily be a Presbyterian congregation? He is preaching, passionately, and his illustration comes from the game of football. However, what is not immediately evident is that he is also wearing headphones and listening to the game on the radio while he preaches.

I have no idea what was being advertised. What amused me were the looks on the congregation's faces as he becomes more and more animated. He describes his team marching down the field in the last seconds of the game. Then, with time running out, they score and he shouts, "*He scores!!*" I wonder if when he stood at the door of the church after worship if anyone came out and shook his hand said: "*Enjoyed your sermon this morning!*"

Often we pastor types wonder what *you* are thinking as we stand here week after week attempting to speak a word of hope and a word of challenge and a word of life-giving transformation to God's people. Preaching may look easy. But it is a struggle to know how to get past the platitudes and reach the people we care about so deeply. People who come week after week expecting to hear a word that will transform their lives. Karl Barth once observed that the most attentive any congregation will ever be is in that profound moment when the preacher steps into the pulpit and before a word is spoken. That moment of silence is poignant with hope. For you always come hoping that today, maybe today, you will hear a Word of truth that will heal your brokenness and transform your life. Once we begin to speak, of course, it is a battle to keep your attention.

Perhaps that is why it is so intriguing to study the response to Jesus' first sermon in his home synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus chose for his text the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. It is text of powerful images. Isaiah tells of a God who will set things right in a world gone terribly wrong. Isaiah tells of a God who will release captives to a people under Roman domination.

Isaiah tells of a God who will set free those who have been oppressed by a government that systematically taxed the people into poverty. Isaiah tells of a God who will usher in the biblical year of Jubilee in which all debts would be forgiven and all slaves set free and all lands restored to their rightful owners and everyone would be given the opportunity to start life again on equal footing.

When Jesus finished reading this powerful word from the prophet Isaiah he said simply: *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* In my mind this is the shortest sermon and the most powerful sermon ever preached. Imagine preaching a sermon and then seeing it come true before your very eyes! Now that would be a sermon no one would ever forget.

When the service in the synagogue is over, Jesus greets the congregation at the door. *“Enjoyed your sermon, Jesus.”* There’s a little pat on the back as his old synagogue school teacher tells him how proud they are of him and how he had put their insignificant little village on the map. There’s a word of encouragement from the Clerk of the Synagogue. The chair of the Rabbi Nominating Committee wonders whether Jesus would agree to come home and serve his old congregation.

But then something goes wrong. Jesus realizes that they do not get it. So he explains his sermon right there at the door. *“You don’t get it,”* Jesus says. *“You cannot hear Isaiah and continue to live the way you are living.”* Now Jesus has gone from preaching to meddling. And after a moment these same people are trying to throw Jesus off a cliff.

What did Jesus do to evoke such a response? ***He told the truth.*** He read the words of a prophet and then used the words to dismantle his hometown admirers carefully constructed world of prejudice. Jesus pointed out that God intended the good news of God’s love to be for everyone. Even Gentiles. And with that telling commentary on the prophet Isaiah Jesus left preaching and went to meddling. No one, most especially those who believe they are the only ones to deserve God’s love, wants to hear that God’s love is most especially for the least of these and God’s forgiveness is for sinners and God’s grace is for those who are most unlike us.

So far as I can tell Jesus did nothing more in Nazareth that day than to remind his hometown synagogue that the love of God is bigger than their love. He simply mentioned that in the Old Testament there were occasions in which God had passed over them and their kind in order to minister to strangers. He told about a widow from the wrong side of the tracks in Zarephath and he told the story about Naaman the Syrian who was an officer in the army of Israel’s enemies. He was not telling them anything new. He was simply telling them what their own scripture said. He was telling them that everyone was included in God’s mercy.

Yet like so many in the Presbyterian Church today, that was not how they used scripture. They used it to close ranks on outsiders. They used scripture to keep certain people in a permanent sort of second class status. The *Austin Lounge Lizards* hit Christians where it hurts in one of their songs. They sing:

*"I know you smoke, I know you drink that brew,  
I just can't abide a sinner like you.  
God can't either, that's why I know it to be true,  
That Jesus loves me—but he can't stand you.*

*I'm going to heaven, boys, when I die,  
'Cause I've crossed every "t" and I've dotted every "i."  
My preacher tells me that I'm God's kind of guy;  
That's why Jesus loves me—but you're gonna fry."*

That is one way to be Christian. A way that says "*I'm in and you are out.*" But consistently and courageously over the centuries Christians have shown another way. Self-righteousness and exclusion do not have to be the defining characteristic about us.

So, what does it look like when scripture is fulfilled in our hearing? On an early morning in early December several years ago, someone threw a rock through the window of a home in Newtown, Pennsylvania. It was the third day of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. The home belonged to the Markovitz family, a Jewish family. The vandal reached into the broken window, grabbed the electric menorah inside, and smashed it to the ground.

The people in the neighborhood took this seriously and they took it hard. They were pained that a hate crime could happen in their neighborhood and fearful that it foreshadowed greater violence. One of the neighbors, a Christian woman by the name of Margie Alexander, decided to do something about it. She went from home to home visiting her Christian friends and explaining what they could do to help, to show support for the Markovitz family.

Within a few days, on the next-to-the-last day of Hanukkah, twenty-five Christian homes displayed brightly burning menorahs in their windows. The vandals never returned. And, as the lights burned on, barriers between people were broken down and love overcame hate. At least for awhile.

Every once in awhile we see the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ in the flesh. Every once in awhile we see some act of love so compelling that we can only say: "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" AMEN