

January 31, 2010 Fourth Sunday in Epiphany Luke 4:21-30

I feel fairly confident that I am safe here among friends. This is my spiritual family whom I love and have had the good fortune to have been cared for by you so often. This is my home town where I feel very confident and safe. If you don't like this sermon, you may ignore it or fall asleep or possibly arrange the rest of your day, but I don't have any fear that I will be pushed off the edge of a cliff (fortunately Ann Arbor doesn't seem to have any dangerous ones around)

I suppose that Jesus felt just as welcome in the little synagogue in Nazareth. As Luke reports, "And all spoke well of him." But something in Jesus' sermon ticked off the dear residents of his home town. Apparently they were looking for more than words, they hoped to see some of the great miracles it was rumored that he performed around the neighborhood. And when Jesus was not ready to entertain the crowd with wonders and sensational actions they became very upset.

What a way to start out your career by getting thrown out of your own home town. In fact, if Jesus hadn't moved quickly, or as Michael once inferred, if the good old devout hadn't been so caught up in their own arguments that they didn't notice that the object of their hatred simply had walked away, Jesus would have tried out sky diving without a parachute at their insistence.

Building on Michael's sermon of last Sunday, since this is the next passage in Luke, we look at Jesus' message as being in the NOW! Jesus was referring to Isaiah's announcement that He is appointed to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, the setting at liberty those who are oppressed and that ***this is the acceptable year of the Lord***. This is the Now activity of the Lord. So since Jesus has stepped aside, who takes up the challenge? Maybe God will send angels to "do justice and love kindness."

But I am disappointed in angels. I had believed that they were wondrous beings that interceded for us and protected us against all of the harms of this world. But in going through 297 references to angels in the Bible, I found that they rarely interfere very much in what happens to us. They do make announcements and sing in very good harmony at every opportunity. They also bring plagues and famines and in general wreck havoc on evil doers. They guarded the Garden of Eden when our ancestors were deposed. They destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah when they saved Lot and his daughters. They stood with Daniel and also with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego against lions and fire. But most of all they came bearing the message of God to the prophets and in later years to Mary and Joseph. An angel led Peter out of prison and another smote King Herod who assumed the role of a god. And in the book of Revelations they come riding down on earth to visit devastation in the last days. An angel did get involved with Gideon, but the only act the angel did ended up in disaster. Gideon had prepared a meal of cake and lamb to present to an angel. When the angel touched the meal with his staff, he burnt it to a crisp and then disappeared. I guess that angels don't make for very good cooks. But I can't find much hope for my daily struggles in their mediation. On whom then can I depend for assistance in the time of trial?

That's where the miracle of God's love comes in. God does not send his angels to rescue His people. He sends His faithful servants. I strongly believe that God created us humans because we are pretty exciting. Sure we break God's heart and hurt one another with our selfishness, bickering and insensitivity that has led to wars and poverty and devastation of the earth. And we see that going on all around us and often we are right there in the middle of it causing much of the pain. Angels don't know any better so they go on singing and adoring the Almighty. But when we reach out to touch and to heal and to love we delight the parent God. We have the free will to heal or hurt and I believe that when we heal it brings a smile to God's face. I have had the privilege of watching our youth at Youth Works in West Virginia, southern Illinois and Toronto. I saw the fulfillment of God's love in their action with the poor and forgotten. They made a difference. I have felt the ministry of you especially in the past two years not only in our life, but also in your care in this church in song and praise and service to those in need, in your habitat work, and especially in your open welcome of all in our worship and church life.

Like Michael always says, God will pursue us to the ends of the world or the end of life whichever comes first. I like his illustration that Good Friday and Easter are two events where God says, "nyah, nyah you can't make me stop loving you." I remember when I was dating Sally who lived north of Detroit. I would leave Columbus after classes on Friday and dash across Ohio on those little two lane roads that went through every village and hamlet in my white four door 57 Ford. There just wasn't the interstate highway system back then. When I finally got up to Michigan where I hit the first expressway (I-75) and I would open up that baby and tear up to Detroit. I broke a few speed laws and all of the traffic moved out of my way. And only later did I realize why I wasn't pulled over by the state troopers. They also used identical 57 white Ford four doors as unmarked patrol cars. And any patrolman must have believed I was truly in pursuit of someone. Which I was. God also pursues us with the same very forward intensity and breaks all the rules of this world to take you into His arms. And when he does, God has a whole new life for you, a life that will share God's love in this world.

Closing Prayer (sing it if you can):

I the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them, my hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide,
'til their hearts are satisfied.
Whom shall I send?

Here I am Lord.
Is it I.
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart. Amen!

