

C Lectionary 4 2.3.19

Luke 4:21-30

Focus Statement: Jesus transforms us.

There is an experience I have had many times as a preacher and a congregational leader where I hear a text read in the midst of worship, a text I had spent the whole previous week in study and prayer with, as if I was hearing it for the very first time. Last Sunday I had that experience with the Old Testament reading from Nehemiah. Diane read Nehemiah chapter eight, verse eight, "So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." They read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. And I thought, that's the kicker right there, isn't it. With interpretation. Because it's one thing to read a text, or to hear a text read, and to agree that the words the reader said are the words written on the page. But it's a whole other thing entirely to interpret those words, to bring those words to life, to comment on what those words mean in the midst of our real lives.

Interpretation is a funny thing, because it's a thing we all do subconsciously, and oftentimes with no idea that we are doing it. We hear or read something and the thought we have isn't even "this is what it means," it is "this is what it says." Meanwhile, someone else hearing or reading the exact same words right next to us can have the same thought, "this is what it says," and have in their mind the exact opposite meaning of ours. It's like one of those optical illusion pictures, is it a vase or two faces. It's both, but if you focus too hard on one you become completely blind to the other.

As a preacher, I try to be acutely aware of this complication of interpretation, of the fact that the words I'm saying may not result in you hearing the meaning I intended, because you hear my words through the lens of your own experiences. There's an incredible painting from the sixteenth century artist Lucas Cranach that depicts Luther preaching to a congregation in St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, and between Luther and the assembly is the crucified Christ. The idea of the painting, and my hope as a preacher, is that the words of the sermon are not from my lips to your ears, but they are filtered first through Christ. I have many times after delivering a sermon had someone come up to me and thank me profusely for saying something that I know for a fact I did not say, because I have the manuscript in front of me, but for them it was the exact words they needed to hear that day to bring comfort, hope, and healing. Those are the days when it works well. I have also had the experience of someone coming up to me, quoting me verbatim, and thanking me for proving their point, which was the exact opposite point of whatever I had been trying to say. Many, if not most of you have probably heard me use this line, because it's one of my favorites, but there are times when we're just going to have to agree to disagree.

All this to say, interpretation, it's tricky. But we have to do it because words without interpretation are meaningless, they're just words. Interpretation, what the words mean in our minds, in our lives, in this world, that is what gives these texts staying power. Because the words stay the same, but how we hear them can change based on where we are at in that moment. I've read that passage from Nehemiah countless times, but it wasn't until I was sitting in worship, in a room full of people who had been bullied, been made to feel unwelcomed or unloved, by poor interpretations of scripture, that the importance of

making clear the meaning of our words echoed for me. It is not enough to say words, we have to say what we mean by them. Because what is meant by them, if they are the words of our God, is life.

Interpretation is what got Jesus in trouble in our Gospel reading for this morning. First a quick recap of how we got here. Last week, we heard about how Jesus, filled with the Spirit, began to preach in the synagogues and “was praised by everyone.” He came to Nazareth, to his hometown synagogue, and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he handed the scroll back to the attendant, sat down, and said to the people, “today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And as we heard this morning, at first, that all went rather well. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” The gracious words, of course, being the words of the prophet Isaiah. Words which everyone knew, which everyone agreed that Jesus had read just as they were written on the scroll. But Jesus, being Jesus, didn’t stop with just reading the words as they were written. He went on, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’” Then he started telling stories about the sort of people who would be freed, “There were many widows in Israel... yet Elijah was sent to none of them except the widow at Zarephath.” And, “there were many lepers in Israel... and none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” Faced with these actual examples of freedom, the crowd got really ugly, really quickly, “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.” Which,

interesting observation that I'm not sure how much to make of, but Jesus had just said, "this scripture has been fulfilled," and now the crowd was filled, but with rage. And, "they got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff." And let me say real quick, as a preacher, that a possible response to preaching in the model of Jesus is that the assembly could turn on me with such force as to attempt to throw me off a cliff does not fill me with great comfort.

Luckily, while I think I'm a fairly good preacher, I am not so arrogant as to compare myself to Jesus, and also Battle Creek is pretty flat, so I'm probably safe from cliffs. But what I find so powerfully hopeful about this passage, is that Jesus' love for these people was so strong, so deep, so profound, that he was willing to say these incredibly hard and challenging words to them, knowing that it would end in his being thrown out of the community, because he loved them too much to let them stay where they were. Because what Jesus said to the people of Nazareth, the thing that got them so fired up, was that this message of God's grace and love for all people, this message is bigger than you. And it's not enough for you to sit here in this synagogue. To truly understand the scope of this movement you're going to have to move, to be moved. Because if you stay here, if you stay settled, you won't get how big this thing is, you won't get the power of what God has sent me to do for you.

What this passage says to be is that God is so determined to transform us that God is willing to use any tool to shake us out of our comfort zones and get us in motion. I've said this before, but it bears repeating, God is big enough for whatever emotion you may throw at God, even rage. You can be mad. At God. That's legit. Read the Psalms.

And the thing about anger is, it gets you going. I hate it, I hate the feeling of being angry, I hate the out of control was it makes me feel, but I have to admit I have a tendency to overthink things and get bogged down with what ifs and with fear. But when I'm angry, I respond. I was listening to an interview with Abby Wambach and Glennon Doyle about courage last week, and Doyle remarked that courage often starts with rage, it's right in the word itself.

And then, right in the middle of their anger, right on the precipice of the cliff, Jesus "passed through the midst of them and went on his way." Jesus challenged them, he stirred them up, he got them moving, but he could not, he would not, be stopped by them. Friends this is the kind of love Jesus both has for us and calls us to. The kind of love that is not afraid to face hard things. In that same interview on courage, Doyle talked about how the hardest part of being a parent was letting her kids get hurt by the world. Letting her kids know that everything was not safe and easy, and that things and people could hurt them. Watching her kids experience struggle and pain and not bailing them out. But she said she tried to let them be hurt because that was the only way they could grow, and because she and Abby were trying to raise their children not to be fire avoiders, but to be firewalkers. To be brave enough and strong enough and courageous enough to walk through conflict and controversy knowing that they would be ok, that they would survive.

Dear friends in Christ, Jesus came, Jesus has come "to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's

favor.” This is the good news that Jesus is bringing, the world-changing, life-saving, promise of grace and hope and love of God for you and all people. So do not be afraid to let this news challenge you, do not be afraid to let this news change you, do not be afraid to let this news save you. Because Jesus has already passed through the midst of us and is on his way. Amen.