

“When the Bible Makes People Angry”

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Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³ He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

WHAT MAKES US ANGRY?

What makes us angry?
Let me count the ways!

How about drivers who cut you off on the turnpike?
Check. That makes us angry.

Some people have even been know to attack others.
Road rage.

How about politicians?
Do they ever make us angry?
Check again.

When I was growing up, I was warned by my parents never to talk about politics.
And today political talk can be absolutely lethal.

I read of some folks who even cancelled the traditional family Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. So, yes, politics can make us angry.

How about friends or family members who betray us in some way?
Are any of us angry about that? Double check.

You know that old song,
"You always hurt the one you love?"
It's true.

WHEN THE BIBLE MAKES US ANGRY

But, today I want us to think about something else that can make us quite angry.
The Bible.

You may have noticed the title of my sermon, “When the Bible Makes People Angry”.

Later I thought about making a modification to that title.

I would write, “When the Bible Makes People Angry
...and then put a line through “People” and write “Us” instead.

So the corrected title would read,
“When the Bible Makes (Not Other People)
but Us Angry”.

That title would have had more bite.

We can imagine someone else getting angry about what the Bible has to say.

Those “other people” might not believe the Bible.

We could understand if the stories of the Bible made them angry.

But, what about us?

Is it possible that we might actually get angry at what the Bible teaches?

That’s hard to imagine isn’t it?

We believe the Bible is God’s Word.

We revere the Bible.

We probably have more than one on our bookshelves.

In days gone by we even had a big Bible on our coffee table with the family history in the front.

We are ready to defend the importance of the Bible,
and will lambast anyone who attacks it.

The Bible is a “lamp unto our feet
and a light unto our path”.

Right?

The stories of the Bible
bring us peace and comfort.

Right?

Not always.
It's complicated.

And today's lesson helps us understand why.

PREACHING AT HOME

When Jesus preached in his hometown long ago,
the people who worshiped in the synagogue that day were people
who knew and loved the Hebrew Scriptures.

They were serious about their faith.
They believed the Scriptures pointed to a day
when God's Messiah would come to save His people.

And when Jesus came back home to preach,
there was reason to be excited.

His fame preceded him.
In our lesson for today we read that Jesus had already been preaching in
Galilee and Capernaum.

And the word was out.
Everywhere Jesus went, people praised him.

And Nazareth was no exception...at least at first.

When Jesus preached, all spoke well of him.
The people were amazed
at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

And then someone asked, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"
In Luke's gospel this question doesn't necessarily seem to be a bad thing.
Maybe this question was prompted by their praise.

It was as if they were saying,
"Wow, this guy is a great preacher.
And he's one of us.
He's Joseph's boy."

THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR

What were those gracious words that made everyone in that congregation speak well of Jesus?

In our lesson for today, Jesus begins by reading from the prophet Isaiah. It was a text about how society would be changed for the better by the day of God's salvation.

Jesus read,

"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."

But, this was more than just the reading of a familiar text.

When Jesus read the Scripture, it seemed personal.
It wasn't just the prophet speaking.

The Spirit of God was speaking
through the words of the prophet,
...and through Jesus.

Some scholars suggest that this passage refers to the Year of Jubilee.

The Year of Jubilee is described in the 25th chapter of the Old Testament book of Leviticus.
It's a year of new beginnings.

Every fiftieth year all debts are to be cancelled.
All slaves are to be freed.
And all land is returned to original owners.

Through this practice God's people were to learn an important spiritual lesson.

They didn't own anything.

God was the real owner of the land,
and they were merely God's stewards.

(Leviticus 25:23)

There's no record that this time of new beginnings was actually put into practice.

But, the promise of a Jubilee Year played a big role in the religious imagination of God's people.

The promise of a Jubilee Year brought them hope during times of struggle.

One day things would be different.

One day the Year of Jubilee would come.

When the prophet wrote this message, God's people were in Exile in Babylon.

Their homeland had been destroyed,
and they were slaves in a foreign land.

And to this captive and discouraged people Isaiah imagined a Jubilee Year, a time when everything would change. He said,

"A new day is coming.

Your salvation is about to arrive.

God is going to help you start over.

You are going home."

THE MESSIAH

Over the years this promise had become associated with more than just a return from captivity. It was a description of what would happen when the Messiah would come.

When the Messiah would come,
it would be like a Jubilee Year.

The slaves would be freed.

Debts would be forgiven.
The sick would be healed.
The exiles could come back home.

That's why every eye was on Jesus
after he read the Scripture.
There was a sense of anticipation.

Could he be the Messiah?
Could the words of the prophet be fulfilled in this man from our home town?

Well, as it turns out, the people had it right.
Jesus said simply,

"Today, the Scripture has been
fulfilled in your hearing."

The key word was "today".
The wait was over.
Today, in the ministry of Jesus the reign of God would begin.

If only the story had stopped here,
it would be so much more satisfying.

Jesus had them in the palm of his hand.
All spoke well of him.

But, Jesus would say more, and things would change dramatically.

A GOOD SERMON GOES BAD

I read an article this week by a seminary professor.
He said that sometimes his student preachers would start a sermon, and
everything would seem to go so well.

He wrote that hope would rise
in his professor's heart!
He would think,

"This is interesting.

All the other students are listening.
Important questions have been raised.”

But, then...something would go terribly wrong.
A good sermon would go bad.

He wrote, “The student suddenly utters a few lines that you just know would be terribly wounding to any number of people in a congregation.”

Thankfully this is just a student sermon and not one delivered on Sunday to a congregation.

He concludes, “The sermon that started out so strong and with such great promise falls flat.”

In a way, Jesus’ sermon seems to be like those ill fated student sermons.

Jesus was doing so well.
His sermon started with such promise.
People were lapping it up.

If only he had pronounced the benediction and ended that service while he was ahead,
things would have been fine.

But, no, he had to quit preaching and go to meddling.

All the people that had been so happy with what Jesus said become enraged.

They were so mad at Jesus that they actually wanted to kill him.

They took him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built and were going to throw him off that precipice.

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME?

What made the people so mad?
The Bible.

Jesus used stories from Scripture in a unique way.

What Jesus said challenged a deeply held belief.

What was that belief?

The idea that God is always on our side because we are the chosen ones.

Jesus said, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’

And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

I think this means something like our saying, “charity begins at home”.

These hometown folks believed that they needed to save and heal their own before seeking to do something for those other people, those ruffians and Gentiles who live in Galilee and Capernaum.

Jesus knew the folks in Nazareth well.

He knew what was in their hearts.

He knew that their vision of the kingdom of God was too limited.

So, Jesus recalls two stories from the Bible that talk about the expansiveness of God’s grace.

Those illustrations from Scripture absolutely light a fire under those hometown folks.

SALVATION FOR THE OUTSIDERS

Jesus begins by saying in effect,

“I’m a prophet, and prophets speak the truth about that no one wants to hear.

This is especially true when you speak that truth to those who know you best, the folks in your hometown.

So, you’re not going to like what I have to say.

But, I’m going to say it anyway because it’s a truth that you need to hear.

God’s salvation is for the whole world,
not just for a select few.

And here's the proof.

Think about some of the stories in our Scriptures.
From time to time God even decided to go outside our nation in order to demonstrate his grace.

Think about that widow from Zarephath for instance. Did you ever think about why God chose her, a foreigner to shelter His prophet, Elijah? Did you ever think about why she was the only one to receive aid during a time of famine?

Or, if that doesn't convince you that God sometimes uses outsiders as the vessels of his grace, think about that Syrian commander, Naaman. There were many people who had leprosy when Elisha was a prophet in the land.

But, God chose to heal only Naaman, an enemy commander in order to further his purposes. If ever there was a passage that proves my point this is it.

We say that charity begins at home,
but Jesus said that sometimes charity begins
away from home,
and he had Scripture to prove it!

The people wanted to see some miracles in their own hometown.

But, the ministry of Jesus was about more than miracles. Jesus was not just a hometown hero. The miracles were just a sign of something greater.

The miracles were a sign of salvation and hope that would stretch beyond Nazareth and even their nation.

Jesus was not Joseph's son as they thought.
Jesus was God's Son.
And that meant that his mission field was the world.

JONAH

There is an expansiveness to God's grace that many still find troubling.

The Bible does not allow us to live in isolation, not caring about the rest of the world.

The Bible commands to go into all the world, proclaim the gospel and make disciples in Jesus' name.

The Bible tells us that God's salvation is often surprising; God's salvation comes from outside the boundaries of what we think is acceptable.

I thought of another story from the Hebrew Scriptures that makes Jesus' point.

Do you remember the story of Jonah?

Jonah was called by God to preach to the people of Nineveh, the sworn enemy of Israel.

The Ninevites were renowned for their cruelty in the ancient world. Everyone thought that they deserved whatever bad thing might happen to them.

And that's why Jonah didn't want to preach to those people.

Jonah not only knew the character of the Ninevites, he also knew the character of God.

Jonah knew that God was a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Jonah 4:2)

And Jonah didn't like that one little bit.

He figured that if he preached a word of warning, these terrible enemies might throw themselves on God's mercy, and God might well be merciful.

Jonah didn't want his enemies to repent.

Jonah wanted his enemies destroyed.

We too might be offended by the idea that God's grace is extended to those whom we don't approve. Like Jonah, we don't want those radical terrorists who blow up our buildings saved.

We want them dead.

And so we are afraid to consult the Bible too much when it comes to our enemies, our real enemies. What was it that Jesus said about our enemies? Didn't he say something about loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us?

No, it's best not to talk too much about that love your enemy stuff.

It's best not to talk too much about the plight of immigrants and those from another country that are desperate for salvation.

But, Jesus won't allow us to make him into a hometown hero. His salvation is just too great to be contained in one town or one country.

It's for the whole world.

When people really hear that message, when they are confronted by Jesus with this radical grace, they still get mad.

They want to walk out.
Sometimes they even want to kill the messenger.

But, in today's lesson the mob doesn't get to rule.

SALVATION ON THE PRECIPICE OF DESTRUCTION

The Scripture tells us that when they led Jesus out of town to execute him, Jesus finally performed a miracle. It was a Houdini escape miracle. He passed right through the midst of them and went on his way.

The escape of Jesus from this angry mob also represents what happens when people will not listen to God's message of forgiveness and salvation. Jesus passes right on through, and we do not lay hold of him.

He leaves us behind because we are not willing to receive what he has to offer.

We might call on his name and ask for miracles, but if we are not willing to forgive others as he has forgiven us, then we are just not ready for the kingdom of God.

Jesus “threw the book” at his hometown people that day. Jesus used the words of Scripture against them.

The Bible tells us God’s Word is “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

Sometimes the words of Scripture can be painful.

And sometimes Jesus throws the book at us.
The thoughts and the intentions of our heart are subject to judgment.

And when that happens, it can make us angry.

You know, when someone says something unflattering about me that is not true,
I get angry.

But, do you know when I get really angry?
When someone says something unflattering about me that is absolutely true!

When the Spirit of God in Christ speaks to us through Scripture, that can happen.

We can learn a truth that we don’t want to hear.

We can get so mad that we want to throw Jesus off a cliff.

But, Jesus has a way of escaping our efforts to make him say something that is less offensive.

And even when he is taken to the brow of another hill and crucified,

...his fierce love will not go away.

On the brow of that hill he tells the folks at Nazareth, and he tells us,
“Father, forgive them...”

And those words quench the anger that eats away at our soul.

When the Bible makes us angry, those hard words of truth, like a surgeon's scalpel
remove the cancer that eats at our soul and brings us a salvation and a forgiveness that is greater than we could have imagined.

The brow of the hill is transformed from a place of senseless sacrifice,
to a place where salvation is born.

Amen.