JESUS PREACHES; LUKE 4:16-30; JANUARY 27, 2013; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

We follow our wonderful interfaith pulpit exchange with today’s story of Jesus reading the scroll and preaching in his hometown synagogue. Luke shows us that Jesus’ mission arises out of the bosom of Judaism, out of Jesus’ faithfulness to and full participation in the ritual of Sabbath, the wisdom of Scripture and community of the synagogue. Jesus’ mission is shaped and defined by these Jewish perimeters. And though he has already worked wonders in and around Capernaum, it is in Nazareth that Jesus proclaims what his ministry will be, yet is, ironically, unable to do anything there.

I want to look today at this simple sermon Jesus uses to announce his mission to his hometown. It raises for our consideration the medium of preaching as a tool for ministry – and the two-way nature of the sermon.

Though we don’t know precise details regarding the synagogue service in Jesus’ time we do know it included an informal liturgy of prayers, reading of Scripture, commentary on the text, and alms for the poor.

The synagogue emerged during exile in Babylon as a surrogate for the experience faithful Jews would have had going to the Temple in Jerusalem. The origin of the sermon can be traced to the transformation of worship as the offering of animal sacrifices at the altar by priests in the Temple to what became the ‘religion of the Book’ in the synagogue where scholars like Pharisees became the chief interpreters of the text. Thus, while there was only one Temple, synagogues arose wherever ten adult males wished to constitute one. Like churches, synagogues were schools, community centers, places for worship and for administering justice. It’s where the action was in whatever village it existed and still is.

A friend at the JCC told me how when he was a young man walking down Hertel Ave. one Friday night with a hot date and two friends with their dates an old Jew suddenly appeared out of a tiny synagogue then on Hertel. The old man told the three younger men, whom he knew from the neighborhood, that he was conscripting them to make a quorum for Shabbat. Jewish law prohibits any male who is called upon to make a quorum to refuse. So these three guys on their way to the North Park to see a movie with their sweethearts ended up at the synagogue saying prayers. “What happened to your dates?” I asked; “they went home,” Bernie said.

Contemporary religious practices have their beginning in ancient ritual. When Jesus was handed the scroll to read followed by his teaching he was participating in the central act of the Jewish liturgy then and now; a practice carried into early Christian worship.

And by the way, we learned last Friday at Temple Beth Zion that one of their scrolls was rescued from a Nazi storehouse where it was being kept to be placed as a relic of the Jewish people in a museum Hitler planned to build after his Final Solution. TBZ reads from this scroll each Friday; it would be roughly like using a chalice and plate for communion from Stalin’s purge of the Russian church.

Jesus’ preaching was a highly anticipated moment by the congregation that raised him. They can’t wait to hear what their boy has to say.
As Luke says, “all eyes were fixed on him.” You can imagine the pride – “Joseph and Mary’s boy; back home, just look at him, how handsome and smart!” Yet, what Jesus has to say does not reinforce their self-congratulating pride; rather it is like a picture that turns into a mirror in which those Nazareth synagogue-goers had the disconcerting experience of being shown something about themselves that they already knew but were not yet prepared to admit. Jesus, in his sermon, exposes the “elephant in the room.”

They say the role of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. This could be the biblical account where that old saying came from. Walking that line between comforting and afflicting can be tricky business for any preacher because it can go quickly awry; either the preacher can abuse this privilege and use it as a way to vent her discontents or she can avoid rocking the boat all together and pretend injustice does not exist; the key is to avoid both while speaking the truth in love as Jesus does.

Did you notice the first word out of Jesus’ mouth is “today”? Preaching has to be relevant to life here and now. Jesus does not lead with the distant past or some far off future but with the present. His understanding of faith in general and of our relationship to him and to God in particular is that it has traction and purpose in how we conduct ourselves today. From a 30,000 foot perspective, this is a watershed moment in the history of religion. A new era is beginning; the legalistic past is over. Jesus announces that he and his ministry mark a qualitative difference in day to day life. The age of God’s reign is here. Those who have waited and hoped; the oppressed; the imprisoned will all find relief, strength, renewal. The time of God is today. The ministry and new life of Jesus is now. Luke never allows today’s faith to become a relic of yesterday or the vague promise of some ‘by and by.’

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus says. At the Mosque last Friday the leader of the prayers was an imam from California candidating for the position Imam Nazim Mangera will vacate when he returns to Toronto at the end of March. While the candidate was preaching two young men were handing out blue cards with ten questions and a place to rank the guest preacher! If such cards had been passed out in Nazareth the first response would have been positive but the final response a lethal rebuke; the later of which marked the success of the sermon.

Immediately after Jesus said “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” everyone was a buzz with praise. It was a Hallmark moment. But what follows is the Hallmark picture of the friendly pastor and congregation turning into a mirror.

Jesus says, “we have an elephant in the room.” “Doubtless you will say to yourself ‘physician heal thyself’” for “no prophet is known in his hometown.” In other words, you don’t get what I am saying because you are blind with self-satisfied pride. Then he reminded them of the time God overlooked his own people during a famine to feed a non-Jew; and the same during a plague to heal a non-Jew because God’s people in those instances rejected and looked down on their pagan and leprous neighbors. Preachers call this using the bible to interpret the bible. Jesus was saying, “God’s grace is blind to ethnicity, class, and even religion. I am here to distribute God’s grace to whomever God chooses.”
You see, the problem was everyone knew that Jesus had just come form Capernaum where there were few houses of worship and lots of pagans. You don’t have to scratch far beneath the surface to encounter bigotry and bias in any age. The news from Northern Ireland last week is a case in point; Catholics who are a majority on the town council but a minority in the region voted to limit the number of days the Union Jack can fly over Belfast. Riots and violence have erupted. Everything was going smoothly until the old tribal hatreds between Protestant and Catholic were stirred up.

That’s what happens in Nazareth, Jesus exposes the xenophobia of the worshippers in the synagogue and they’re ready to take his life.

I don’t think it’s far fetched to say that preaching can get a person into that kind of trouble. Gandhi, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., or any number of people from centuries past Thomas More, Michael Servetis, Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson and countless others all criminalized or killed because of their preaching.

What gives preaching such power? Words combined with the Holy Spirit says Luke – it’s a potentially lethal but also life-giving brew. Luke is clear about the role of the Spirit in Jesus’ preaching; first it blesses his mother during her pregnancy, then it blesses him at his baptism, leads him into and out of the wilderness; now it informs his preaching.

Preaching happens when the Holy Spirit and the right words find each other; that is the sweet spot of the sermon; when some truth is spoken that has the power to transform us. It may be called a sermon or a constitution, “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal.”; or a letter, “Love is patient, love is kind, love is neither arrogant or rude,”; or it could be a traditional sermon, “I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama will be transformed so that little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as brothers and sisters. I have a dream today.”

Dr. King was doing just what Jesus did in Nazareth and the people took offense. But some people, ultimately most people heard Dr. King’s words combined with the Holy Spirit and embarked on the journey to justice in this nation; just as happened in Galilee and Jerusalem after Jesus was gone; they remembered the itinerant rabbi; his words infused with Holy Spirit penetrated their hearts and they were transformed; they started preaching in their homes and neighborhoods and workplaces – not long, boring sermons, but messages of good news, hope and freedom!

You never know what the Spirit has planned for a sermon. This past week a colleague asked “did you ever preach a terrible sermon and have someone come up after the service and say, ‘you were preaching right to me today, that’s exactly what I needed to hear!’”

“Yes,” I said, “and I’ve had the opposite too when I preached what I thought was a magnificent sermon but didn’t seem to leave others with the same opinion.”

You see sermons, when they work, come from beyond the preacher; the preacher is an earthen vessel God uses to distribute life-giving, healing good news to whomever God chooses. What we learn today from Jesus’ preaching is that this good news also brings a sword, as Jesus said, even to kith and kin.
Just so you don’t go away this morning wondering where the “today” in this sermon was, I’d like to offer a little dose of affliction for all of us: the people in the buildings across the street at the Fairfax apartments or down the street at the Lenox or behind us in the Stuyvesant on Elmwood. Where are they today? I don’t see them here.

Have we gotten so comfortable that we don’t need them or see them or regard them as part of our “mission field”? Are we that content with who we are? Satisfied that our ministry is sufficiently matured and developed that it does not have to worry about the people next door or across the street?

That’s our Capernaum. There are lots of, let us say, non-churched folks in those buildings. But God isn’t going to fail to reach out to them just because we haven’t figured out yet how reach them. If we don’t want God to use us to bring good news to neighborhood apartment dwellers, God will find someone else.

There may be other issues we’d prefer to deal with – give me a good fight over gun control any day – but don’t ask me to figure out how to befriend my neighbor across the street.

Actually, we’ve had some good ideas about reaching out to these potential friends; someone suggested a weekly Saturday morning breakfast, free of charge in our Parish Hall prepared in our new kitchen. Third Church in Rochester does exactly this. A big breakfast free to anyone who shows up: single moms with their kids, senior citizens who long for a little fellowship and need some nutrition; wage earners trying to make ends meet, unemployed trying to hold on to hope.

My hunch is we’d fill that empty hall with people from this neighborhood; after that who knows what would happen. In some ways it doesn’t matter – the act of reaching out would be its own reward and bring joy to God’s heart. There’s no better motivation for ministry.

Sometimes sermons comfort – like the beatitudes portion of the Sermon on the Mount; sometimes sermons afflict.

Jesus teaches us today in his first sermon in Nazareth that a little affliction isn’t a bad thing; it can endanger the life of the preacher or, if we’ve learned anything from Luke 4 today it can also jolt the listeners enough so that they take notice and make a difference in someone else’s life; which is another way of saying the first difference it makes is in our hearts and the eternal condition of our souls. Amen.