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What Is Jesus Up To?

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Luke 4:14-30

The preacher that day in Nazareth was on a roll when he came to town. He'd been on a speaking tour throughout Galilee, visiting the villages and synagogues there, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and things were going his way. The response was good. He was being praised everywhere. His reputation was growing.

Jesus is strategic in starting his ministry. He comes out of 40 days in the Judean wilderness and does not go home first. Instead, he goes to the larger towns in the area and begins preaching there – in Capernaum and Magdala, home to the woman we will come to know as Mary Magdalene.

Two years ago Beth and I walked from Nazareth down to the Sea of Galilee. It took us four days. On the pilgrimage we visited the ancient synagogues of Magdala and Capernaum where Jesus had taught before going home to Nazareth. Those villages were quite different from his hilltop hometown. They were on the Sea of Galilee, along busy trade routes, coming from Egypt and going on to Syria. In contrast, Nazareth was off the beaten path, high in the hills. It was a small, isolated village – maybe 300-400 people – full of conservative, traditional Jews, and somewhat closed off, sheltered from the rest of the world.

By the time Jesus finally gets back to his hometown he's made a real name for himself in the more cosmopolitan region along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The people of Nazareth have heard all about him. They expect him to do for them what he has done for those down in Capernaum and the other towns.

Jesus goes to his family synagogue on the Sabbath Day. He's going to be guest preacher there. He's handed the scroll of Isaiah and unrolls it to a familiar passage about the hoped-for Messiah who would open a new era, a new day of justice and peace among the people of God. And then he begins his sermon this way:

"Today, " he says, "This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

So far, so good. Hometown boy makes a name for himself.

It will be the first and only time he ever gets that close to an outright claim to the messiah mantle. He should have stopped there, but Jesus keeps going. Jesus is up to something else, and that's when he gets into trouble. The preacher's good run is about to come crashing to a halt - and I have great sympathy for him.

God, he says, is breaking into history and calling them to account for the way they live. To illustrate this, he mentions two times in Hebrew history when God had intervened to save the people from certain destruction, through famine or drought. The problem is that both times God chose to work *not* through the most pious believers, like those seated in the synagogue that day, but, rather, through unexpected people, even reviled people - a non-Jewish widow and a non-Jew with leprosy, neither of whom had any standing whatsoever among those assumed to be God's people.

That was too much for the congregation in Nazareth. First to equate himself with the long-awaited Messiah – sounding like *blasphemy!* And then to imply they were not among those through whom God would work – sounding like *heresy!*

Professor Tom Long says of preaching that at its heart is “the astonishing cry of the witness, ‘Something has happened! Everything has changed!’” (*Why I’ve focused on form and function,* Christian Century, 12/20/17, p. 29)

That’s what the preacher is up to that day in Nazareth. That’s what Jesus is saying. *Something has happened. Everything has changed!*

But his listeners have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear. Their hearts are closed. That will be the story of the rest of the ministry of Jesus.

Those who are the most religiously observant will not be the ones who believe that *something has happened and everything has changed*. It will be the women and children, who don’t count for anything in that time, whom he honors. It will be the people rejected because of disease or disability or age or status in life, whom he heals and loves. It will be the sinners condemned by everyone else, whom he accepts. They will hear him. They will believe. Their lives will be changed.

But the people in Nazareth in the synagogue that day aren’t ready for that. They’re furious at Jesus for suggesting they’re not in God’s good graces. In their fury they push Jesus out of the synagogue and into the streets and to the edge of town and nearly throw him off the cliff.

Surely that experience reminded Jesus what he had just gone through in the desert temptations, when the devil took him to a high tower and told him to jump and the angels would save him. We don’t learn what saves him that day in Nazareth, but he breaks free and walks away, unscathed, and heads back down toward the towns along the Sea of Galilee.

In a way, the townspeople do exactly what Jesus calls them to do: they leave the confines of the synagogue and go out into the streets, out into the town, out among the people who are at the center of God's concern. A summons to go out into the city should sound familiar to us at Westminster – something of a recurring theme these days.

If they are “to bring good news to the poor” and “proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind (and) let the oppressed go free,” that will not happen inside their house of worship. We will never address the crying needs of so many in our world if we sit behind these walls, comfortable in our religious rituals and never go outside to encounter the world. And if we do go outside we will not be able to do much by ourselves.

Ministry in the 21st century necessarily draws us out of the protection of our own way of doing religion and into coalitions with people of other faiths or of good will. This afternoon's interfaith gathering in our sanctuary, Bold Hope in the North, will help prevent homelessness because we're working with thousands of others whose religious practice requires them – as does ours – to leave their houses of worship and work together in the streets of the city for the common good.

If we want to join Jesus in proclaiming “the year of the Lord's favor” we will find ourselves having to stand up for things we had at one time counted on someone else to deal with. We will need to speak out against what we had previously accepted or ignored or let slide. We will go places we have not gone before.

We know those places, and we try to avoid them. It's simpler to hide behind the mantle of our professed religion and go through the motions than it is truly to practice our faith. And it's always easier to see that kind of hypocrisy happening in others, especially if they are within our own tradition, than to see it in ourselves. I am guilty of this.

This week when I read about Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, saying that evangelical Christians were tired of being “kicked around” by the previous administration in Washington and, referring to the current administration, “are finally glad there’s somebody on the playground...willing to punch the bully.” I reacted to that.

When asked about the injunction to turn the other cheek, Perkins said, “You know, you only have two cheeks. Look, Christianity is not all about being a welcome mat which people can just stomp their feet on.”
(<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/23/tony-perkins-evangelicals-donald-trump-stormy-daniels-216498>)

Tell that to Jesus as he’s pushed out of the synagogue by his pious countrymen and nearly thrown off the cliff, as he’s persecuted and hounded by the religious and political authorities of his time, and as he’s walking up the hill to Calvary.

Too often self-described evangelicals seem willing to set aside the kind of biblical mandate Jesus lays on us in Nazareth for short-term political gain. Not all evangelicals agree; in fact, there’s quite a discussion among them now. Many of them are wondering if the term “evangelical” still has any shred of meaning.

But before we judge our sisters and brothers in the faith too harshly let’s remember that Jesus was speaking not only to them, but to us, as well. We should take care not to become obsessed with the speck in someone else’s eye and not notice the log in our own. In the cultural and political and religious climate of America today it is so easy, and – *shall we not confess it – so satisfying*, to see *all that is wrong* in somebody else, in the other, those with whom we disagree.

The danger with putting on such blinders, of course, is that we can't see where *we* fall short, as well. And then *we* become the righteously offended worshippers in the synagogue in Nazareth. We imagine Jesus is talking about someone else, not us, when he repeats those words from Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, and when he says that God will choose to work through not those in the synagogue, not those in the sanctuary, but through the last people we would expect.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus says of Isaiah's words. *Something has happened. Everything has changed!*

That synagogue scene is the start of the public ministry of Jesus. He's not come to Nazareth to meet the religious expectations of his fellow townspeople or to play into their prejudice and affirm it. He's not there to talk about religious things at all, really, about tithing, or keeping the Sabbath, or following the religious proscriptions about eating and farming and marriage and sex and family life – there were rules for everything, 613 of them in the Torah – but Jesus does not turn to them in his one and only sermon in his hometown synagogue.

That's because Jesus isn't focused on religion for its own sake. And he's especially not interested in *religiosity*, that is, adhering to the rules, keeping the tradition, following the path trod for centuries, but *missing the point of it altogether*. As if *nothing had happened and everything were the same*.

If our faith doesn't *shake us up* and *wake us up* and *turn us around* then we're not paying attention. And in Jesus' eyes there's nothing worse than mouthing the faith and not meaning it. His most strident words in the gospel are reserved for hypocrites, those who profess religion but have no intention of practicing what God desires of us.

Jesus is challenging those of us who would follow him to reexamine our lives. Not *somebody else's life*; *our lives*.

I know at certain points in my life I've found it was time to take stock of how I was living. Most recently that occurred when my parents died. Those of you who have gone through the death of a loved one know what I mean: *something happens and everything changes*. And we find ourselves asking big questions about the purpose of life. We look for new approaches, make new discoveries about ourselves, draw new conclusions about what really matters. We wonder what difference we're making in life.

And if we profess to follow Jesus, as most of us do, we might ask how we're part of the unfolding reign of God of which Isaiah speaks.

Jesus is not concerned with getting the doctrine right. He's focused instead on getting the *practice of our faith right*. He wants to get relationships right – not only personal relationships, but relationships among the human family, within our communities. Our faith is fundamentally about God's hope for humanity, about just relationships among neighbors and among nations, about loving the most vulnerable among us – not about a religious creed or system, and getting it just right.

The preacher that day in Nazareth was digging deep and hitting home: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It was not about their religion. It was about their *lives*. It was, and it *is*, about *our* lives.

Something has happened. Everything has changed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.