

The Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 24, 2016
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

Jesus, According to St. Luke

For days, the expectations were increasing. Some were anxious, others curious, many excited. What would happen on the big day? The days leading up to this weekend's blizzard remind me of the tremendous expectations in Nazareth when people heard the reports about Jesus teaching (on the approaching Sabbath) in the synagogue where he had grown up.

We had to stay in the safety and warmth of our homes to ride out the big snowfall. Today and tomorrow, many will dig out and venture out. But most of Nazareth must have come out on the Sabbath day to see and, if possible, hear Jesus. Reports about his baptism and his teaching reached Jesus' hometown before he did. St. Luke uses this story to introduce us to the meaning and purpose of Jesus' ministry. And as Luke expands the narrative of Jesus' birth and early days, so too, Luke gives us a much fuller description of Jesus first preaching in Nazareth than in the other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Mark.

In fact, we really need to read the rest of the story, the verses that follow today's reading, to understand the full impact upon those who heard him. Luke begins his narrative by telling us Jesus was "*filled with the power of the Spirit...*" Earlier, Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism (3:22). Afterwards, Jesus "*full of the Holy Spirit... was led by the Spirit for 40 days in the wilderness...*" (4:1, 2). The Spirit empowered Jesus to withstand and reject the Devil's three temptations for Jesus to gain power, wealth, strength. Luke shows us that Jesus is directed, supported, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Luke also shows us that Jesus chooses to read from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus defines his ministry, his mission, his purpose using the words Isaiah used for the Messiah who would come to heal, to liberate with justice and mercy for those oppressed, for the poor, for those needing to know God's love and God's power.

Yet the most astonishing part of the story is when Luke tells us that Jesus proclaims, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" Jesus accepts the divine call to be the Messiah. The one promised for centuries is here. Jesus does not just point to God's love. He is God's love incarnate, active, changing lives, changing the world.

In the next nine verses, Luke tells us about the reaction of those present. They wonder about these words, this teaching. They question Jesus. He replies at one point, "*Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country.*" (4:24). Jesus goes on to mention how people misunderstood Elijah and Elisha. Increasingly those in the synagogue grow angry at Jesus. Luke writes, "*all... were filled with rage...*" (4:28). They drive Jesus out of the synagogue, then out of town, even hoping to physically harm or kill Jesus. But Jesus passes through the crowd and leaves Nazareth.

This rejection in his hometown at the start of his ministry is just a preview of what will come. People misunderstand; people judge; people reject; people will demand his execution. This is the cost of Jesus identifying himself with the long expected Jewish Messiah. This is the cost of his ministry to the poor, the outcast, those needing healing and forgiveness. This is the cost of Jesus' challenge to those with religious and political power.

Here at the start we are confronted with God's call to us – those of us who say we are part of Christ's Body, the Church. We know what Jesus does for God. As we consider Jesus' baptism, his time in the wilderness, the start of his ministry, we need to reflect upon what we are doing for God. How are we answering the call of the Holy Spirit? Individually, in our professional and personal lives? Collectively, as members of Grace Church? Who in our world, in our lives needs God's love, God's healing, God's good news? How are we changing lives? What is our purpose?

Next week, at the Annual Parish Meeting we will review some of the work we do together. We will elect new Vestry members to help lead us in our ministry and mission. We will thank those who have served faithfully in the last year.

Mostly we celebrate our life together as Christ's Body: The purpose, as we understand it, of our parish's mission; the ways we try to stay true to this call, this mission in 2015; and the hopes we have for 2016. This is the good news. This is the year of the "*Lord's favor*." This is the "*today*" we celebrate and live.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6

Psalm 19:1-8

1 Corinthians 12:12-20, 26-31a

Luke 4:14-21