

You may remember a number of years ago a synod initiative to prepare flood buckets; at synod assembly we collected and filled hundreds of five gallon buckets with rubber gloves, respirators, sponges, mop heads, and other materials people would need to clean up after a flood, then each conference picked a church to store them so they'd be easy to find and distribute when they were needed. A few years later, this area did get hit hard with rain from the tail end of a coastal hurricane, so the buckets came in handy. Pastor Amanda heard on the news that in another part of the synod, a dam was in danger of failing and flooding the community downstream from it, where she knew there was a Lutheran church with a relatively new pastor. She sent a message to that pastor to make sure he knew about the flood buckets. He responded that he lived 20 minutes up the road, above the dam, and his house wasn't in any danger of flooding, so he didn't need one. Amanda had to tactfully explain that she had reached out not only for his benefit but because she was concerned for others, for the church and the people who did live in the flood zone...How do you make someone understand that they should care about other people?

By this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has not done much public ministry, but he has started to draw attention and praise for teaching in the synagogues around Galilee. Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth where the people have known him from childhood and have apparently heard about the ministry he has done in other places like Capernaum. In Nazareth's synagogue, on the sabbath, Jesus is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read. It is unclear whether he asked for that scroll, it was chosen for him, or it was keeping in the order of readings that the congregation had been studying, like our lectionary. In any event, Jesus chooses this passage:

*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.*

And then he tells them: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

By applying this passage to himself—saying it was fulfilled that day—Jesus announces that he is the Messiah, or if not *the* Messiah, at least *a* messiah. The word *messiah* means *anointed one*, and using Isaiah's words he says, *[The Lord] has anointed me*. So Jesus tells the people that God has chosen and appointed him for a specific task. But throughout the gospels, both the disciples and the crowds had expectations of the Messiah that Jesus did not meet. So Jesus reminds them what scriptures says the Messiah is anointed, chosen, commissioned to do: *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...* That sounds good to the people of Nazareth, who speak well of him and are amazed at his gracious words; gracious could mean his eloquent way of speaking, but could also mean he was preaching grace in the form of release, recovery, freedom, and favor. So far, so good.

Jesus' old neighbors are impressed by their hometown hero: *Is not this Joseph's son?* But Jesus anticipates them asking for miraculous favors like what he has apparently done elsewhere, because they

think they have a privileged claim as the people who knew him way back when...And that is where things take a turn for the worse. Jesus reminds them that two of the greatest Old Testament prophets performed miracles for people who were not Israelites: Elijah fed a gentile widow during a famine and Elisha cured a foreign soldier of leprosy. God sent prophets to help those outsiders, even though there were plenty of suffering Israelites. The congregation, which at first was so pleased to hear Jesus' promises, when they thought he was making promises just to them, turn on him in an instant when they realize that Jesus' good news is intended for others. The people of Nazareth think they've got an "in" with Jesus, but he corrects them: *no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown*.

To fully understand what happened here, we have to remember what it means for Jesus to refer to himself as a prophet. The prophets were called to speak God's word, which was often a word of hope and comfort to those who were suffering, but also a word of caution and correction to those who were *causing* the suffering, advocating for the oppressed by speaking truth to the oppressor. We like to say *the gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable*. But for doing that, the prophets were received about the same way Jesus is here—threatened and sometimes killed. What is remarkable in this story is that Jesus doesn't even challenge the people of Nazareth to the extent that the Old Testament prophets challenged those in power; in the grand scheme of things, the members of the Nazareth synagogue were not the ones primarily responsible for making people poor, holding them captive, or oppressing them. So Jesus isn't even asking them to change their behavior; he's just telling them that the promises he's proclaiming are not exclusively for them, but are for other people, too. They are so irate that other people might also get what they have been promised—even though that is God's promise—that they want to throw the messenger off a cliff.

Scholars disagree about what happens next. I've been to Mount Precipice, traditionally thought to be hill where this took place. It's not the kind of cliff a coyote would try to push a roadrunner over, so maybe Jesus crested the hill and made it down the other side unscathed, or maybe he was too fast or agile for them to catch him, or maybe he disappeared while they were all miraculously distracted or confused. Or maybe, when Jesus didn't recant and didn't back down and didn't waiver in his proclamation of God's good promise, maybe the mob simply realized that they didn't have the power over him that they thought they had.

We still live in a selfish world; there are still way too many people who are relatively comfortable themselves but don't want others to have even a fraction of what they have, even if it requires little or no sacrifice on their part. I can't say it any plainer than this: that's not a Christ-like way to look at the world. If we are going follow Jesus' example, it means living like God's good intentions are not just for *us*, however we define *us*, but for everyone. Keep saying that, and we may find a mob at our back, pushing us toward a cliff; but we'd be in good company. May God give us the courage to proclaim, with our words and our actions, that the Lord's favor is for everyone, and may our witness to that promise soften the hearts of those who believe otherwise.