

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Turn the Lights Off

Sermon Reflection Notes

Epiphany is about God becoming visible in the world. The sermon series is about Jesus becoming visible, about his identity being revealed. God, in Jesus, was revealed to the wise men, revealed to those present at Jesus' baptism, and to those servants who were present at the wedding in Cana. This week, Jesus went to the synagogue in his hometown, Nazareth. He read the scripture for the day from Isaiah 61, a text that echoes the voice of mother Hannah's song in I Samuel; it echoes the voice of the Psalmist in Psalm 113; it echoes the song of Jesus' mother Mary in Luke 2. In each of these songs, and through many more voices singing throughout the Bible, God is said to be at work turning the world upside down, reversing the way money and power work in the world.

There is something about being back in your hometown, something even Jesus reckoned with in this story. The place we are from, the people who helped raise us, often never stop thinking about us in particular ways. It's hard when you've known someone forever, maybe even babysat for them or taught them in school, to see who they are *now* versus who they used to be. The people of Nazareth knew Jesus back before he was JESUS, back when he was Mary and Joseph's kid, the one who got left behind at the temple that one time. They had heard of the work he was doing now of course. They were excited for him to come home; he was handed a scroll during worship and read the appointed text of the day, and then he went to sit down. But everybody kept staring at him. They had heard of his preaching and were waiting for him to show them what he had been showing everyone else. So, he finally said: "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Which they loved! Yay, Jesus is going to fulfill the scriptures, just like we taught him when he was a boy!

But Jesus chose not to stop there. He went on to point out that throughout scripture, prophets call for the king and for the people of God to care for the poor and to welcome the stranger. The reaction to Jesus was swift and fierce. The people of Nazareth wanted to hurl Jesus off the cliff because of their own sin of believing God is their own and only their own. That God's mercy is reserved for only them.

Jesus didn't do much except proclaim the message of Good News contained in the scriptures. Jesus' hearers do not want to share their privileges with outsiders, but Jesus's message is intentionally focused upon the marginal members of society. To show mercy to all. Jesus' sermon in his hometown is an invitation for us to think again about the depth and power and seriousness of the Good News of the Gospel. The Good News of Epiphany is that God is on the loose, unrestrained by the conditions we try to impose. The Good News is that the outsider, the orphan, the widow, the stranger, are proclaimed, by God, to be included, with us, into God's family. At times, love and mercy can be radical and dangerous. Be brave. For in Jesus, the scriptures are fulfilled. Let's follow Jesus.

Scripture

Luke 4:14-30 (NRSVUE)

¹⁴ Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. 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 set free those who are oppressed, 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 this not 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 his 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 with a skin disease 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.

Discussion Questions

1. Let's retell the scripture story from this week in our own words. What surprised you in this story? What did you hear that you hadn't noticed before?
2. Pastor Ron pointed out this week that he doesn't choose the scripture every week. He uses a lectionary text. What is the lectionary?
3. As Pastor Ron pointed out, Jesus didn't have to talk about Elijah or Elisha and their work healing the outsiders. He could have just stopped speaking, but he didn't. The congregation was enraged and wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff. So, when is the right time to speak the truth of scripture to a congregation?

4. 'Be merciful' (i.e., take care of the poor, free the oppressed, welcome the stranger among you) is the foundation of Christianity, as well as a thematic thread throughout the entire Bible. What are 2-3 (or more) specific scripture passages that make this abundantly clear?
5. Pastor Ron said the people of Nazareth wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff because of their own sin. What was their sin? Why is that a sin?
6. How are you responding to God's call to extend mercy to all? How are you building relationships with those who are different? How are you making unlikely friends?

Closing Prayer

In this season of Epiphany, O God, we yearn for your light in our midst. We find ourselves in a dark time, captured by our fear, our anxiety, our worry about the future, our alienation from each other that we cannot manage.

We want to be people of light, your light in the world. And so we pray for the light of your presence in our midst. We pray that we might be brave, have courage, and find the words to speak the Good News of the gospel – that your family circle is ever expanding and the table is big enough for all. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who sang your welcoming song to everyone. Amen.

"Be merciful" is really the basic foundation of living a Christian life."