

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
Anita Rediger
January 31, 2010

“On The Brow of the Hill”

This morning’s Gospel text finds us holding our breath as Jesus takes his seat in the synagogue...and not just any synagogue. Jesus returns the Isaiah scroll to the attendant and sits down to teach – in the synagogue, the synagogue in Nazareth, the synagogue of his hometown.

I don’t live in my hometown. I left home for college after high school and now have spent more years in Indiana than on the Nebraska prairie. My high school classmates still seem to me – in my mind’s eye - to be 18 year olds. I’m always taken aback when I bump into school friends when I’m visiting “at home.” Why they look grown up!! They now are the business persons, board members and organizers in the community! It’s hard for me to imagine my mother calling on Brian Carmen to advise her on the purchase of a new appliance!!! Brian Carmen...the shaggy-haired kid in the trumpet section!!! I can only imagine what he would say if he heard that I was entrusted with the opportunity to pastor a vibrant faith community! He’d probably shake his head in disbelief as he remembers one of the giggling girls from the saxophone section!

Jesus has come to Nazareth, the community of his childhood. The writer of the Gospel of Luke places his homecoming at the very beginning of his ministry. (In contrast to Mark 6 and Matthew 13). In the Gospel of Luke we find Jesus – fresh out of the wilderness – filled with the power of the Spirit teaching in the synagogues of Galilee.

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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“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 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. Luke 4:16-20***

“The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” What a great moment! Stop action! Everyone must have been holding their breath...hearts pounding... The silence is broken when Jesus says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Everyone was amazed! “All spoke well of him...”

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Everyone was amazed , “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (Matthew & Mark record, “Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? Where did this man get all this?)

Jesus – for the moment - is the marvel of the crowd. Why wouldn’t they be delighted! To put it mildly, what an asset he’ll be to the community! What a great resource he’ll be! Between the lines, it seems that Jesus senses the crowd’s calculations - plans which might well quickly move to laying claim on him, to attempting to harness the healing energies flowing through him, schemes which might quickly move to making a commodity of Jesus instead of releasing this Good News to the ends of the earth. Quickly Jesus senses their desire to harbor him as an ethnic treasure instead of a cosmic Christ.

Before the hopes of the gathering can get too high, Jesus continues with accounts from the stories of the prophets...Elijah and Elisha –prophets **to** God’s chosen people, prophets **of** God’s chosen people whose actions spread the healing gifts of God beyond the confines of sectarian sensibilities. Elijah and his ministry to the Sidonese woman; Elisha and his ministry to the Syrian leper...Jesus doesn’t mince words, “It isn’t because there weren’t any Israelite people needing healing that Elijah and Elisha engaged the widow of Zarapheth and the Naaman, the commander of the army of the King of Aram. Long, long ago, a covenant had been made with Abraham...that he would become the father of a great and chosen nation, the people of God...through whom the salvation of the world would come...as a blessing *for all the families of the world!* Before we too quickly shake our heads over the crowds offense, I’m reminded how easily it is to forget that God’s good gifts are not simply given for my benefit alone, but are to be shared with all God’s peoples, shared with all of God’s creation.

Two weeks ago we listened to the account of Jesus at the wedding of Cana. We noted in his actions of transforming water into wine familiar hints of the actions of these very same prophets...Elijah going to the poor widow of Zarapheth and in their shared encounter, she discovered that her empty larder was resupplied; Elisha aiding another widow woman who found herself so deeply indebted that creditors were nearly ready to seize her children in repayment. This woman experienced release from her debt as God’s healing actions flowed through her faithful response to Elisha. (oil that was enough to fill all the empty containers in the neighborhood!)

At the synagogue, on this Sabbath morning, Jesus is again connected to the story of salvation, the salvation history of the People of God and through these stories he sets the foundational tone for the news which would continue to burst forth throughout his ministry – the Good News that the Messiah had most certainly come and on top of it all – the Messiah had come to be savior – not just for a certain people group, but for all

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people! What an unexpected way to build a kingdom! What an unexpected surprise!
What a disappointment!!How offensive!!!!

Quote from Andrew Warner, Senior Minister of Plymouth Church, UCC, Milwaukee, WI

Why is the crowd angry at Jesus? Our scene of the riotous crowd comes just after Jesus has read from the Prophet Isaiah, but what he did not read is as interesting as what he did. The original Isaiah, ended, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God." But Jesus cut that short, ending with the Lord's favor.

The crowd loved his deft handling of Isaiah, who wants vengeance after all. They smiled and congratulated themselves for raising such a fine young man: "look how far Joseph's son has come!" But then the happy mood changes as Jesus starts to speak of God's favor for those other people, those outsiders. First he speaks of the widow Elijah healed in Sidon, "that foreigner!" Then he mentions the old Syrian general Namaan, whose descendants are now the roman soldiers parading around the land: "an outrage!" The crowd that smiled when Jesus forgot to read of Isaiah's vengeance now recoils when God's favor extends beyond their pleasant community. In fact, the idea of God's inclusive, expansive, limitless favor drove the community into a murderous rage: "he certainly didn't learn that nonsense here!" From "Still Speaking Daily Devotions" Jan. 21, 2010

The worshiping congregation quickly turned into a raging, murderous mob. Everyone leapt to their feet. They dragged Jesus out of the synagogue "to the brow of the hill...so that they might hurl him off the cliff." Not simply to scare him a little, not just to push him down, but to "hurl him off the cliff." "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

What a strange ending for our morning reading...so much excitement, so many hopes, so many questions, so much anger...and now this: Jesus passing through the angry mob, simply going on his way. If we were to read on we would find Jesus again teaching, preaching and healing.

We've noted the connection in this story with Jesus and the early prophets – a connection which looks back into the tradition...there is also a connection in this story which points forward into the future. Consider Jesus – this time at home -...first of all lamenting that the hometown folks might well miss out on the joy of the kingdom. As he proclaims sight to the blind, good news to the poor, release for the captives...the religious powers cannot bear such a threat...and off to the brow of the hill they drag him...intending to silence him through death...but Jesus passes through the midst of them and goes on his way...continuing to bring sight to the blind, good news to the poor and release to the captive – in very real places with very real people.

We're soon to enter the season of Lent (Ash Wednesday – Feb.17). We'll begin the journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. Again Jesus lament's, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem...Luke

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19:41, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...

In Jerusalem, that great city where Pontius Pilate and Herod hold court, the offensive Jesus is accused of treason. He is led outside of the city, once again to face his death... this time, Jesus doesn't slip quietly through the crowd. He is crucified and he dies. Yet, three days later, when the tomb is opened, he's gone! He's gone! He is risen! The risen Christ asks the women, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" The risen Christ appears to his disciples, bringing sight to the blind, good news to the poor and release to the captives. In the same way, the body of Christ the church, continues Christ's work, in very real places with very real people. The cycle of threat, of risk, of death goes on. But so does the cycle of resurrection to new life and new ways of kingdom work!