

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
January 26, 2025 – 3 Epiphany
Luke 4:14-30
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The passage from Luke's Gospel that we just heard describes an event that occurred after Jesus had been baptized by John and then been led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he had spent forty days fasting and being tempted by the devil. At the end of the forty days, he left the wilderness and traveled to Galilee to preach and teach. In Nazareth, his hometown, he attended the synagogue. The synagogue services – unlike services in the Temple in Jerusalem – were relatively informal. They consisted of prayers, reading of Scripture, comments on Scripture, and the collection of alms for the poor. All male Jews were permitted to read and comment on Scripture.

Luke tells us that very early in Jesus' public ministry he attended the synagogue in Nazareth and read the words we just heard from the prophet Isaiah and then commented: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus stood in the synagogue and read about the message God entrusted to God's anointed one. He virtually said that he was God's anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah. And at first the people receive this news well. They express a strikingly positive regard for Jesus – "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Jesus had announced the good news that he was God's anointed one who would liberate and heal and bring blessings to God's people. The Jews assembled in the synagogue assumed these blessings were for the Jews.

But Jesus challenged this assumption, using examples from the Hebrew Bible. The people assembled in the synagogue that day would have been familiar with his references, though we probably are not. Briefly, they are these. First Jesus spoke of one of the greatest prophets in Jewish history, Elijah. In the 9th century BCE Elijah was away from Israel, in Sidon in the north. He was in exile because his life was in danger from Ahab, the king of Israel. While he was in exile, God directed Elijah to heal the son of a widow, a non-Jew. As Jesus says to the people in the synagogue, there were many widows in Israel to whom God might have sent Elijah. But God sent Elijah to a foreigner to work this miracle. Jesus then refers to another Hebrew prophet, Elisha, a great healer. Elisha healed Naaman, a general in the Syrian army, of a skin disease. As Jesus said, "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." Once again, God sent the Israelite Elisha to a foreigner to work a miracle.

Jesus uses the Hebrew Bible to make his point that God's blessings extend beyond the Jewish people. The people in the synagogue in Nazareth were infuriated. Their positive regard turned to violent rage. "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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."

Here at the beginning of the Gospel Luke makes important points about Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God, who will fulfill the promises of God to God's people. And the promises of God are for all people. In Jesus' ministry this will be made clear over and over again. Jesus the healer will heal Jews and non-Jews, even the slave of the Roman centurion, an agent of the foreign oppression of the Jewish people. Jesus will bring the good news of salvation to good people and to "bad" characters – tax collectors and sinners. And Jesus will be rejected for this; his message will incite violence.

So, how can we relate to this Gospel story? First of all, we are reminded to examine our prejudices about groups of people we might regard as inferior in any way. Most of us have been taught to hold prejudices, in blatant or more subtle ways. We absorb prejudices from our culture and sometimes from our families. We do well to be careful about generalizations when we think or speak. The people in any group we can imagine are not all alike. Are all Christians alike? Are all Episcopalians alike? Are all men or all women alike? Certainly not! Neither are all the members of any other group we can think of. This is especially important when we or others judge groups of people as inferior.

Let's look at another way we might relate to this Gospel story. We are all glad personally to hear the good news of God's love for us, aren't we? And we are glad to know that God loves the people we love, too. So far, so good. But what about our enemies? Think about this. Make it personal. Have you had enemies in your life? Someone who has done what is wrong and harmed you, blocked your way, thrown your life off course? Has someone acted with malice against you? Has someone used you for their selfish purposes? What happens if you imagine that God loves that person as much as God loves you? What happens if you imagine that Jesus seeks out that person to offer him or her the chance for repentance and salvation, all with the limitless love of God? There may be groups of people we regard as enemies, for one reason or another. Think about Jesus' teaching that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Are you getting out of your comfort zone with the "good news" yet? I am. If our hearts are not yet full of God's compassion and love, we may resent Jesus' message of God's love for all people because we think that some people should be outside the circle of God's love. And if we are honest, we may understand the reaction of the people in the synagogue in Nazareth that day long ago.

There are places in our hearts – each of us knows where they are – where we need the grace and light of Christ to lead us from anger, resentment, judgment, and hatred to compassion. May our love for Jesus guide us to greater love for others, those we love and those we don't love. This is the transformation to which we are called, the transformation that the Holy Spirit will lead us to, step by step, if we will join our wills to the will of God. By the power and grace of God and in Jesus' name. Amen.