

An Unsafe God
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Luke 4:21-30

Crowds can be scary things. Hardly a day goes by, it seems, that CNN doesn't show images of a crowd that has become a mob. Mobs are truly dangerous, unpredictable, uncontrollable. They reveal the worst of humanity, points at which something deep in the human psyche becomes volatile and, in an instant, outrage boils over into violence.

It happened just that fast with Jesus, as we heard in the Gospel of Luke. One minute, those present were preening in pride over Jesus, one of their own, who was making a name for himself. The next, the crowd became a mob and was about to toss Jesus off the brow of a steep hill.

What gives? What happened?

The crowd in question that day – and every crowd since - discovered that we worship an unsafe God, a God who won't be domesticated, a God who won't be tamed, co-opted or redefined into something that fits our comfort zone and our purposes. On a day two thousand years ago, that news turned a friendly crowd into an angry mob but not even an angry mob can mute the voice of a God who came to be heard and to inspire action in all of us.

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So let's take this story step by step this morning. Think of it, if you will, as a three-act play. We begin with Act 1, titled "Hometown Boy."

In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Jesus does a remarkable thing. As he is teaching, someone hands Jesus the Isaiah scroll. He instantly opens it to an exact place, the same as if I handed you a Bible and you opened it precisely to one specific passage. Jesus read these words from Isaiah:

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. (Luke 4:18-19)

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll. With all eyes fixed on him, he said to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It's hard for us to imagine just how startling this was. God's people had waited for centuries for the messiah the ancient prophet Isaiah predicted. Now one of their own stood in the synagogue and claimed that title.

There's something deep inside us that wants to claim even a slight connection to fame. One example, which seems to happen every year, is a story in the Observer earlier this week. The paper tracked down the one player in today's Super Bowl who grew up here and interviewed him about his experience headed into the big game. Take that and magnify it by about a million and we might have some sense of how much the hearts of the Nazareth town fathers swelled that day when Jesus claimed he had been sent by God to save the lost.

But it's funny We almost get the feel that the town fathers that day didn't really listen to what Jesus was saying about the poor, the outcast, the captives, none of whom were represented in the room. It seems the fathers were more impressed that day with how Jesus handled himself. They liked the "cut of his jib" we might say, how he demonstrably grabbed that scroll and decisively opened it to that one verse. If they were to use our modern-day language, they might have said "That's our boy" or "He's a good guy," subtle code words to communicate that Jesus seemed safe, familiar and manageable.

But Jesus didn't intend to leave things there.

End of scene one.

The title of scene two in this play would be "Scandal."

After the people in the synagogue patted him on the back, Jesus anticipated what they might say next. Jesus was creating a buzz around the region, demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit in him in various ways. So, he said to the people, "you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did in Capernaum.'"

In other words, Jesus figured they would want him to do a little razzie-dazzle for the hometown folk. Maybe they would call in a few TV news cameras or ask Jesus to give a keynote to the local Chamber of Commerce, cut the ribbon to open the new business park or receive the ceremonial keys to the city.

But instead, that's when celebration turned to scandal. Jesus had the audacity to remind the hometown crowd they do not have a lock on him as the messiah. Jesus had come, he said, as the manifestation of a God who has a history of siding with the least expected.

Remember, Jesus said, when God judged all of Israel with a severe drought? And to whom did God send his prophet? A widow, of all people, the kind of person who would have been at the bottom of the social ladder. Likewise, Jesus said, do you remember when God judged Israel with an outbreak of leprosy? God offered cleansing only to a Syrian ... and a non-believer at that ... and then God rejected the Syrian's thank offering of money!

If we listen closely enough, we can almost hear the crowd starting to rumble and murmur. Who does this guy think he is, they thought? He's not sticking to the talking points we prepared! Why is he going out of his way to show us that God sheds favor on whomever God chooses, not just the in-crowd?

Why indeed, we might join in asking?

The truth is that we in the church can be just like the synagogue crowd, can't we? We want to claim Jesus as our own, especially if he is the safe Jesus, the go-along-to-get-along-Jesus, the I'll-scratch-your-back-if-you-scratch-mine Jesus.

Deep down, we want the Jesus whose stories offer us comfort, whose lessons we can soften, whose values affirm our values – at least that's what tell ourselves. We can take Jesus' most radical sayings – say, the Beatitudes or that business about how the last shall be first -- and tame them into abstractions. We hear the good news and assume it is for us. We figure that there must be some for whom God's love is out of reach.

You personally may not think that way – but, Lord knows, the world does, our culture does. We insist on stratifying society – by race, by class, by education, by sexual orientation, by the clothes we wear to the sneakers on our feet, by the car we drive to the neighborhood where we live, by the political party we claim, even by the religion we practice.

Someone, some group must be below us in the grand scheme of things, we insist. Someone must be less deserving not just of God's love but equally less deserving of other things – such as dignity, such as justice, such as equality, such as compassion

and caring. Because, if that's not the case, well, shoot, we are inherently no better or no worse than anyone else.

Is that what you are telling us, Jesus? Are you sure, we might say, you want to "go there?"

No wonder the crowd turned into an angry mob that day, which brings us to scene three of today's play. We might title it "The Word that would not be silenced."

At this point, the mob had heard enough. What does a body do with an irritant? It rejects it. That's what had to be done with Jesus.

We can almost hear the murmur in the crowd build to a roar.

"Let's snuff him out, here and now, before his crazy ideas go any further," the crowd might have yelled. "That's the best way to hold on to our position and power and prestige. If we let him keep this up, the poor might actually hear what he calls this good news. The blind might see. The captives might be set free. Then what kind of world would we be living in?"

So they swept Jesus up and climbed to the top of a steep drop. It was time to silence the one who had been called the Word made flesh by tossing him over. But the Word would not be silenced. Somehow, Jesus passed through their angry grasp.

With that, the curtain falls on our three-act play.

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That three-act play may end there, friends, but it is not the end of the story. It's not the final curtain. This story in John merely foreshadows another scene, the big climax, where the crowd did "get" Jesus. They crucified and buried him in a tomb, thinking they had done what that mob back in Nazareth had failed to do. But he slipped away that time, too.

In this season of epiphany, we see again that the Word made flesh can't be silenced. We don't have to look too far or listen too long for signs in our own lives.

Yesterday we celebrated the life of Mike Middleton, who gave the last two decades of his life to working with those in recovery from addiction. A very disturbed man whom Mike had sponsored showed up at his door a week ago and shot him. But just as the

Word would not be silenced that day in Nazareth, Mike's murder only magnified the message of recovery, a message that, in Christ, the captives can be set free.

So, too it is, as we begin African-American Heritage month. Stop and think of all those martyrs who gave their lives for civil rights. Some are well-known, such as Medgar Evers of the NAACP. Others not so well known, such as Rev. George Lee, who used his pulpit to advocate for voting rights, until he was murdered.

Then there were the innocents, including 14-year old Emmitt Till. He only looked at a white girl the wrong way. There were also the four youth in Birmingham. They only wanted to attend church one morning in 1963 when a white supremacist bomber took their lives. These African-American martyrs had the audacity to believe Jesus' message, that Christ came so that all who are oppressed might be set free.

That Word lives on, friends. It cannot be silenced. That is the good news, and it is for you and for me and for all who are in any way impoverished, captive, blind or oppressed.

Amen

