

## **INFURIATINGLY GOOD NEWS**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:14-30

Ask people how they got into their line of work these days and you will get a mixed bag of explanations. Someone starts out studying English Lit, and ends up a banker. A chemistry major becomes an HR person for a large department store. I had a colleague in the ministry once who left cancer research to become a pastor.

People make several changes not only in employers but also in their entire field of endeavor these days; like a lawyer friend who was telling me that a young partner in his firm said that he was leaving law in a year or two to go into the ministry, and he would do that for the next ten years, and then do something else. This is an understanding of ministry I barely comprehend, but it is one that is au currant these days.

Not in the days of Jeremiah or Jesus, however. Jeremiah had prophecy in his blood. Word came to him from God in 627 B.C., the year of King Josiah's reign, calling Jeremiah in words he could not ignore,

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.<sup>1</sup>

Now there's vocational clarity! Few of us have such a clear sense of who we are and what we are meant to do any more. Some wish they did have that clear a sense of direction. But beware, it was an unenviable call as it turned out. Jeremiah had a bad run of it. He was cursed by the crowds<sup>2</sup>, beaten and arrested<sup>3</sup>, nearly lynched<sup>4</sup>, and tortured<sup>5</sup>. Former friends and even members of his family so despised him that they plotted to assassinate him<sup>6</sup>. It is not for nothing that there was the saying, "A prophet is not welcome in his own country."

Yet Jeremiah could not have been Jeremiah had he not followed that voice within him that made him a prophet. Some of us know what that is like. You artists in the congregation know it, don't you? There is paint in your fingers and it has to reach canvas. You writers know this itch that has to be scratched. A day without writing is a day without joy. And, okay, you actors, we know you wait tables, but only to act, only to sing, only to do what it is that keeps you here and keeps you going so that you can do what it is you must do, to be you. For Jeremiah it was in his blood. He had to be a prophet.

And the same was true of Jesus. Except Jesus should have taken heed to the dangers Jeremiah faced. Jesus did not have a good run of it either. Take the story today of his hometown crowd. He barely had time to freshen up after his wilderness experience, tempted in the desert as he was. But filled with the Spirit, Luke tells us, he returned to Galilee and began to preach and teach in the synagogues around the countryside. And all spoke well of him.

He came to Nazareth, and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. He stood up, as was the custom, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and he began to read,

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 it was good. Everyone liked what he had to say. After all, who could argue with old Isaiah, the 8<sup>th</sup> Century prophet? He was long gone, but his words lived on. Treasured, revered. Hundreds of years had passed. Nice message, captives go free, the blind see, the oppressed are liberated; God's favor is abroad. Who's to argue with that?

And after all, this was Joseph and Mary's son. They all remembered that time when he was twelve and they had gone to Jerusalem and somehow Jesus got left behind. They went three days before they realized that he wasn't with them and they found him in the temple. Cute kid that Jesus. A real scamp. Nice bar mitzvah.

Went to the local high school. Then he worked for his dad for a while in the carpenter shop. Read Hebrew beautifully, learned it with an Aramaic twist from the scribes in the synagogue there. And the passage he read was a favorite. Good news for Israel. The times will get better, the poor will be remembered, the sick healed, and God will bless the lowly in heart. What's not to like here? They all spoke well of him.

It would have been great if he had just left it there and not said anything more.

But no, Jesus had to make a point, he had to go and give a sermon on the meaning of the text. Like many who had gone before him, like Jeremiah, and many who have come after him, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Dr. King, William Sloane Coffin, Jim Forbes, Dorothy Day, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, he couldn't just leave the scriptures lying there, where they were, looking pretty, sounding nice. He had to go and apply them. He had to go and say what they meant.

First of all he said that *today*, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. In other words, I am here to do precisely what the scriptures say God will do. The Spirit is on me, he said. I am anointed. And the self-referential comment was the first thing that began to put too much weight on one side of the boat there in the synagogue.

Then Jesus reminded his parent's friends and his young peers that back in the days of Elijah when there was a terrible famine and people in Israel were starving, Elijah was sent to help, but not to Israel, not to his own people, but to a widow beyond the pale in Zarephath of Sidon (that's Lebanon, from whence Hezbollah was reigning down rockets on Israel last summer). Which is to say this widow was not a Jew.

And as if that weren't enough, Jesus reminded everyone that during the days when there was a leprosy epidemic in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, God didn't send Elisha on any healing missions in Israel, but God sent Elisha to a Syrian by the name of Naaman, (read here Syria, like Damascus, Arab land, where Assad is king today, Syria which along with Iran is funding Shiite militia). Naaman was not a Jew.

Oh, I know that I'm collapsing centuries in making these political comparisons, but the fury of hearing that God was blessing the enemies of Israel was no less intense in Jesus' time than it would be today if this were said by a rabbi in a synagogue in Haifa or Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. Having been in Israel recently with a group from the American Jewish Committee, I can tell you that feelings run high, and anybody preaching that kind of message in Israel today would be taking her life in her hands. It would be front-page

news in *Haaretz* the next morning! That security barrier that stands between Israel and the Palestinian territory may not have been standing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century as it is today, but it has always been there in one way or another.

It was what Jesus said, that turned the tide against him. None of the folks in Nazareth had much time for a rude, brash, gen-Xer coming along and throwing over the apple carts and upsetting the delicate balance of things. Scripture is fine when it's benign, pretty, eloquent, and inspiring, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or the Nativity story, or Paul in I Corinthians 13 on love read at a wedding, (all very nice) but when the Bible challenges the powers and authorities of earth, or makes us question our assumptions about who is in God's good grace and who is not, we don't want anything to do with it.

To wit, the crowd in Nazareth, all dressed up in their Sabbath best, scrubbed and clean, arriving to say their prayers and hear the scripture read that Sabbath morning, got something for which they had not bargained.

And when they heard it they rolled up their sleeves and worked up a sweat and drove Jesus out of the synagogue, screaming at the top of their lungs that he had betrayed them and God. They worked themselves into a frenzy. They took him out to the brow of a hill which is not hard to find in that hilly Nazareth countryside, it's all hills, and they were ready to throw Jesus over the side and let the ride down do its work. But it all came to a screeching halt, and Jesus passed through the middle of them, Luke says, just as pretty as you please, and went on his way.

Now, I'm not going to try to explain to you that last part, about how he just walked out of that mess he was in. It's Luke's way of saying his hour had not yet come, that this was not the day when Jesus was going over the side of a hill, and certainly not at the beginning of his public ministry.

To follow that shell in this game is not to keep your eye on the one that has the pea under it. Better stay with the issue of what happened in the synagogue and why. How the crowd turned on Jesus when he claimed that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's expectation of a day of freedom and restored sight and renewed hope and new beginning. The problem is that Jesus was saying it wasn't just a time of freedom and sight and hope and new beginning for Israel alone but for all God's people, not just Israel, but all people, even Gentiles, and every sensible Jew knew that *those* people were not God's people.

That's what the Nazarenes, Jesus' hometown folks could not accept, that God's embrace was wide enough to encircle everyone. Not just the nice people. Not just the dressed up people. Not just the observant people. Not just the synagogue-on-the-Sabbath people. But all people were encompassed in God's grace and love.

And it was a vision that was too large for folks who had never been out of Nazareth or Galilee to see. A message too encompassing for them to hear. There's a problem, you know in staying home too long. If you don't get out in the world you may never be aware that there is a world out there. And back home there is always a suspicion of what lies beyond the city's limits. Remember the story of the prodigal?

I remember at the end of my college days coming back that last summer to St. Joseph, Missouri and the church that had nurtured me as a high school kid. An elder there asked me what seminary I would be attending in the fall. And when I told him

Union Seminary in New York City, he said, “Why’s a nice Southern boy like you going to a pinko commie place like that?”

What he didn’t realize was, the dye was already cast. My college, Macalester College, to which I will be forever grateful for a larger view of the world, urged every student to have some experience traveling, working, or studying overseas, even before the 1960’s when I was a student there. It was the only campus in this country at that time that flew the United Nations flag on the same pole as the United States flag. After four years there, Union Seminary in New York City didn’t seem much of a jump to me. To that elder who had never left St. Joseph Missouri, my hometown, that jump was a leap off a cliff.

Jesus appeals to a larger vision of the world than his hometown folks could understand and it drove a wedge between them, one so severe, so painful that they took him out to a hill and almost killed him. That’s the problem with getting out there and seeing more than you do now. Breaking open the mold, pushing beyond the shell where you have been so safely protected. If you try to go back, you may find that you are either no longer considered to be a hometown person, or you are considered one of *them*, they who are dangerous, they are who are different, they who are *not us*.

Jesus didn’t get that in college. He got it in the desert where the Spirit had taken him just before it led him back to Nazareth. Out in the desert he had come face to face with temptation, with the powers of the demonic, with the empty promises of what the world can offer you, and a vision that you can see only from the pinnacle of the temple in your dreams. From there he saw that the purposes of God’s redemption reach beyond the purposes of hometown life.

There he realized that the God who was pouring out the Spirit upon him, the one that would lead him to proclaim freedom to prisoners, and captives set loose, and sight restored to the blind was not just for Israel but for all God’s people. From there getting past Nazareth was not very much of a jump if you think about it.

I suppose all of us have ignored Thomas Wolfe’s advice that you can never do it, and we have gone home again at some time and realized that we have changed. College changed us, and work changed us, and relationships have changed us. Living in New York has changed us. Or living away from New York and coming back has changed us. And I’m not just talking about small town vs. urban worldviews. I’m talking about the realization that once you capture a vision of the world that God sees, a world that is larger than that shared by like-minded folks in the Nazareth’s of this world, something miraculous begins to happen.

The blind see, the lame walk, the captives are set free, the oppressed hear good news. And you look at the world from a new perspective, from God’s perspective.

In God’s view of it, there is no longer Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, slave nor free, Israeli nor Palestinian, Shiite or Sunni, Arab or American, for we are all made one in Christ Jesus. Not that we are all Christians, mind you, but that we are all made of one humanity, one heart, one desire for God.

In God’s view of it, there is neither gay nor straight, black nor white, yellow nor brown, for we all one in Christ Jesus.

In God's view of it, there are no national boundaries, but one vision of an earth like those satellite images from space of swirling oceans and moving clouds, desert and dry land, forest and farmland, mountain and plain, lake and river, and one human flesh. Many languages, but one great hope. Several colors, but one deep yearning. Various ways of understanding and naming God, but one holy desire, to know and be known by the Mystery that is beyond our understanding.

We all begin as narcissists, you know. Reinhold Niebuhr used to put it in the simplest of terms, "My toys are my toys, and your toys are my toys, too." But if we are to be faithful to the vision God has of the world, we must move beyond our narcissism to parity. The path of love is the way that leads to community.

This is not a popular perspective in this world that is fighting over oil far more than it is fighting for democracy. Fighting over religious difference more than yearning for spiritual unity. Fighting to preserve wealth, rather than laboring to make sure that every living soul has adequate shelter and food and the essentials of human sustenance.

If you go home again and speak of a world like that, you must harbor no illusions. They will run you out of town, because the disparity between the world that is today and the one that God is bringing into being is threatening to many. But to the hungry in heart and spirit it is good news. There the poor will experience good things, the captives will be set free, the lame will walk, the blind will see, and the acceptable year of the Lord will dawn.

And some day there will be peace on earth, and terror and threat will flee away, and justice will be done, and all God's people one.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 1:5

<sup>2</sup> 15:10

<sup>3</sup> 37:15

<sup>4</sup> 26:8

<sup>5</sup> 20:2

<sup>6</sup> 11:21, 12:6