

“Rage”

Luke 4:21- 30

28 January 2007

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor
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Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’ He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.” ’ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Prayer.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning piggy- backs onto last Sunday's lesson, when Jesus returns to his hometown, reads the the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at the invitation of the religious authorities, proclaims he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, and takes a seat. This is where we pick up the story today.

It is important to recognize that the synagogue audience to which Jesus was speaking was not a gathering of theological lightweights, numb- skulls, or the intellectually challenged. The friends and neighbors of Jesus and his family were learned Jews, schooled in the rich traditions, history, and language of the Hebrew experience. The general lay person knew the scriptures inside and out: Torah, the law and covenant, the Prophets, their warnings and call to repentance, and Wisdom, such as the Psalms and Proverbs.

The average lay person listening to Jesus probably had a deeply felt understanding of being a part of a specifically chosen people, decedents of Abraham, claimed by God, given provided preferential treatment, security, safety, and assistance. God chosen them for a reason; and, just as powerfully, God didn't chose others outside the Hebrew family.

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Believing that you are chosen, special, elite, entitled simply by birth – can be a dangerous proposition, without appropriate context and discipline.

I am currently reading a historical text about the rise of the British Empire, titled “To Rule the Waves, How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World” by Arthur Herman. Admittedly, I am not a deeply schooled individual in the history of western civilization. But it amazes me how different western European cultures would rise with a *Espirit de Corps* and a perception of being chosen and favored by a benevolent God, only to reach their pinnacle and to rapidly face decline and defeat. It was the Italians in the 1400's. The Spanish in the 1500's, until they had their armada crushed and their gold and silver trade with the West disrupted. It was the Dutch who rose and fell in the 1600's, and the French who attempted to extent their global influence and harvest the benefits of the world's marketplace in the 1700's. The British developed their own confidence and power, coupled with their unique understanding of Protestantism, spreading their Empire across the globe, until it could truly be said that “the sun never set on the British Empire.”

Fact is, the sense of elitism, being chosen, special, or entitled can also work on a personal scale. Who here hasn't thought to themselves, at one time or another, “I'm better than that fool,” or “Thank God I'm a Christian, and not a Muslim or a Jew,” or “Thank goodness I'm not one of those 315ers!”

Unbridled and undisciplined elitism can be dangerous. It can be the raw material of hate, discrimination, and even violence. It is what fueled Arianism and Nazi holocaust. It is what fuels the Klu Klux Klan, and other hate groups. It is what drives discrimination – the mistaken belief that I'm better than you; I'm above the law; or God has given me the authority to dominate you.

Jesus was doing fine, reading the culturally appropriate text from Isaiah. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They were amazed that such could come from the unlearned, uneducated Joseph, the simple carpenter who had his shop in town.

Then, it all turns sour. Someone from the congregation spoke up and asked Jesus to do what he had done just the other day in Capernaum, a nearby village on the other side of the hill. Undoubtedly, he was speaking about the miracles Jesus had done. “Can't you do the same in your own hometown?” Enough talk; lets see some action!

Prophets are not accepted in their hometown, Jesus observes. He cites scripture – the sacred text of the elite - to make his point. Elijah wasn't sent to help the widows from his own family suffering from famine. God sent him to the Gentiles, to those who

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weren't chosen or elite. Elisha wasn't sent to heal Jewish lepers; God worked through him to heal a Gentile man, Naaman the Syrian.

“Wait just one second, Jesus,” the crowd undoubtedly thought, “we are the chosen ones, not those scum who come from up north, Tyre or Damascus.”

“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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

Well, they got their miracle. Too bad, it was the result of their intolerance, hatred, and rage.

So what is to be learned from today's Gospel? It makes for a great action scene in our biblical mind's eye, but, what can we learn? How can it serve as a useful tool we can apply to our discipleship?

Five observations are apparent to me. First, it is impossible to predict the future action of God. If we could predict what God is going to do, then we would have the mind of God, and we would be God. Yes, it is possible to review past history of God's intervention, of God's transcendence, with the human condition. We can reflect upon our own experience of God's Holy Spirit at work in our lives. But, like the stock market, past performance is not a guarantee of future events.

This leads us to the second reality; God's agenda is God's own. It was God's intent to reach out to a Gentile from Tyre and another from Syria. We don't command, direct, or play fetch with God. We don't choose where, when, or the why God should intervene or act. Only God is in control. As much as we would like to be the one who is in charge, it is the other way around. God is the master. We are His servants. God tells Elijah to go, and he is simply to go.

Which leads to the third observation about God's relationship with our world: we don't know God's larger plan. It has to come to us as a matter of trust that there are other concerns that God considers. There is a larger picture than what we can understand. Likewise, God's timetable considers years, decades, beyond our lifespan. God's world extends beyond our little reality. There is no way any one of us can consider every element of God's larger plan. It must be sufficient to us to simply trust. Trust God for all the why's, where's, and what for's in our world.

Fourthly, our judgment is limited by our values, beliefs, our culture. No matter how culturally competent we might believe we are; no matter how sensitive we might

believe we are towards others; the reality is that each of us has been given a unique set of beliefs and values, of what we have come to believe is right and appropriate, to the exclusion of others, and their beliefs. We are the product of our childhood; every facet of our childhood, the good, the bad, and the ugly; and no amount of intervention can completely remove the ugly. Recognizing those ugly elements in our own life can be the first step in building bridges with others.

Finally, we can look to Jesus today and recognize that there is divine power and serenity from maintaining discipline and self-control, even in the face of rage.

It is a sad, but true, reality in today's world that rage is all around us. Whether it is the other guy who cuts you off and flips you the bird, a boss that berates and belittles you, or another who throws down ultimatums, threatens, or yells, the only Christian response is the response of Christ – to quietly, calmly, with discipline and self-control – walk away. To counter violence with violence, to stoop to the level of the perpetrator, to resort to an “eye-for-an-eye mentality” is to belittle yourself, to disgrace Christ, and results in the whole world being made blind. Like Jesus, we are called to turn and walk away. Wipe the dust from your feet and move on to other opportunities for ministry, other places where God can use you for God's greater purposes.

Unfortunately, we can't wish away the rage in others. But we can control it within ourselves. Jesus gives us the example, and God gives us the strength. This strategy robs rage of its oxygen and allows it to peter out, effectively limiting its growth and reach.

Great calm and confidence comes to those who are faithful to God; to those who trust that God is in control; to those who believe that God has a greater plan; to those of us who recognize our own human limitations. Calm and confidence comes to those who look to Christ and to those who trust that God will provide the same means, to walk through the crowd, and to leave for other opportunities.

Dearly beloved, take heart! Take courage! Remain calm and keep quiet! Do not engage in rage; rather, wipe it like the snow from your boots and move on, all, to God's greater glory.

Amen.