

Jeremiah 1:4-10 ~ Luke 4:21-30

Not Ready

February 3, 2019 ~ 4th Sunday after Epiphany ~ Communion Meditation

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Introduction to Text:

I read Dan's excellent sermon from last week, so I already discovered that in my absence, while I was out visiting my 95 year-old mom, he has led you down the slippery slope of "binge cheating" ...with the Bible, no less. So you already know how today's gospel reading ends. Don't try to pretend you don't know, and just smile like it's all new and all good. Although I did learn this past Wednesday night from a comedian at the "Comedy Against Cancer" Marshfield Clinic fund raiser that doing this, would be true to your Wisconsin culture. He taught me that what people from other states refer to as a "stoplight" or "traffic signal" here in Wisconsin it is called a, "Stop and Go" light. Why? This comedian suggested that your overflowing Wisconsinite optimism compelled you to develop an alternative to the completely negative sounding term "stop light." He went on to suggest that if you really had your way, here in Wisconsin you would just call them "Go" lights.

Thanks to Preacher Dan, you already know this story does not end well for Jesus. However, you possibly were already familiar with this story *before* last Sunday, because this was the gospel text that I chose for my candidate sermon here back in September of 2017. My sermon title was a question, "Is God's Mercy Too Wide?" Since you voted to call me as your pastor, I believe that we landed together on the answer, "No" God's mercy is not too wide, and that's what we love about God and yearn to live into ever more fully, together. Today, rather than preach that sermon again, I feel called to flip the lens and turn our attention on the crowd's response in the Nazareth synagogue to Jesus' words, and then to take a look at our response, as well.

Warning: We will be thinking more about our "stop" light than our "go" light today--perhaps not our favored angle here in the heart of "can do" Wisconsin. But stay with me and soon enough we will find ourselves at Table with Jesus, whose hard road ends very well, for him and for us. In the spirit of the day, I considered going a step farther in the Wisconsin cultural context and substitute cheese curds for the bread at communion. But that may take another Wisconsin winter or two—and a Super Bowl Sunday where our Green Bay Packers are playing for their 5th Super Bowl championship. I digress.

Listen now, as you hear the Gospel text, Luke 4:21-30 read by me, interspersed with comments of three Nazareth synagogue attendees as they listened to Jesus.

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. (v.21-22a)

Reader 1:

Isn't this amazing? I always knew he would amount to something.

They said, "Is not this Joseph's son? (v.22b)

Reader 2:

Doesn't he look good sitting there? He's a natural at preaching. And to think he is our very own hometown hero. Raised right here in little old Nazareth. Maybe Jesus will finally put us on the map. If he really is the Messiah, can you imagine what he will do for our town's reputation? Things are going to be different around here from now on. I'm sure.

Reader 3:

Did you hear about the things he did in Capernaum? He was healing people who had been sick all their lives! Jesus was all anybody could talk about. I hope we get some of that action around here, don't you?

Reader 2:

Why *did* he go to Capernaum? That place is crawling with Gentiles. Why would Jesus spend his time there? Isn't he here to save us? We're the chosen people. Not those Gentiles.

Reader 1:

Maybe he was warming up his act for us, his true followers. Maybe he thought he'd sharpen up his game in Capernaum where it doesn't really matter, and now he's ready to get started here.

Reader 2:

Boy, am I glad I'm from Nazareth. Never thought I'd hear myself say that. Just think about it: now our troubles are over. We get to kick back and watch our hopes and dreams about the Messiah come true, right in our own front yard. I am totally ready for this. Just think how long we've been waiting!

Reader 3:

Wait a minute. What is he saying now? I'm not sure I like his tone.

He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor cure yourself! And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown 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 hometown." (v.23-24)

Reader 2:

Now why is he bringing out that old saw? Of course, we will accept him here in his hometown, Nazareth. He's the answer to our town's prayers. We want to hitch our wagon to his star. He is our ticket to fame and fortune. He's the one who will save us. It's about time he showed up. *But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up 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 at the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. (v.25-27)*

Reader 1:

Elijah, yes. Elisha, yes. We know our prophets. They were amazing men who performed fantastic miracles. We know these stories. These are our stories, our scriptures the Rabbi taught us. Why is Jesus putting a different light on them? I never thought about all the other famine-stricken widows not fed or all the lepers not healed who were among the chosen people of Israel. That's not the point the Rabbi made when we learned these stories. This feels weird. I'm not sure I'm ready for Jesus' kind of preaching.

Reader 2:

Now he's starting to irritate me. Maybe I was wrong about Jesus. It doesn't sound like he's going to give us the status and privilege we expect. Maybe we got him all wrong. Surely, he

can't be our Messiah... I always thought his family was a little on the strange side. If he isn't going to favor us, he is not the Messiah we've been waiting for.

Reader 3: We have to get rid of him!

Reader 2: Let's run him out of our town!

Reader 1: Get everybody to head for the hill, then over the cliff!

All 3 together:

He can't be the Messiah. Let's go.

[3 readers and the choir walk together angrily (3 abreast) down the center aisle, out the center-aisle doors into the Narthex, as if they were driving Jesus out of town.]

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. (v.28-30)

Communion Meditation:

"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," said Jesus to his adoring hometown crowd. This was his opening line in what turned out to be his first (and last) sermon in Nazareth. Don't you wonder what happened that day inside of the hearts and minds of that congregation? Why did Jesus push them like he did? Was it because he told them their place in God's kingdom, their chosenness, granted them no more privileges than the starving Gentile widow in Zapheth or the feisty, angry Syrian Army commander, Naaman. Was that it? Maybe. Maybe not. Theories abound. Biblical scholars have puzzled over this for centuries. The truth is, we can't really know what happened between verse 22 when "all spoke well of him" and v. 29 when "they got up, drove him out of town" ...and tried to hurl him off a cliff. But we do know how quickly we can boil up and be ready to explode when we feel suddenly displaced or dismissed. And we do know that Jesus was calling them to get on board, to say "yes" to his address: to get on the train, the freedom train bound to let the oppressed go free—now. And they were not ready.

Their epiphany that day shined a light on a Messiah that surprised and maybe scared them. They weren't ready for their God to change things up on them. Not right then, anyway. God's "go light" was flashing. And they hit the brake. What about us here, today? Aren't we like them? Who among us, is ready to give up our power, our sense of privilege—however, wherever we find it? Let's be honest: Moving over, being displaced from where we understood ourselves to be, is not our first instinct, either. But here came this Savior who did just that. And here comes Christ today, calling us to do the same. How are we doing on fulfilling Christ's call to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free?

Our God chose to become one of us to show us how to do this. That's what Epiphany is about. Spotlight on Jesus, who came to show us God-With-Us. God choosing to become displaced, in a sense, by becoming human. And not only that: "...being found in human form, humbled himself, even to the point of death. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Not the Messiah they had been waiting for. They were ready for a Messiah who would grant them an exclusive contract or covenant wherein they alone would be saved and delivered, and rise to political power and glory. But from the moment Jesus opened his mouth, something else came out. If you think about it, the scandal of the Gospel began in Luke with his birth in a feeding trough in a barn. This was going to be a different kind of Messiah. Yes, he used their scriptures, his scriptures--like the one he would tell a little later in Luke, about that Samaritan foreigner who crossed the line and helped out the Jewish man who had been mugged on his way to Jericho. Jesus' text? Straight out of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Was Jesus turning the Torah upside down...or was he turning it right side up?

Here's the question I hear for us today: Are we ready to follow Jesus? Are we ready to say and do what Jesus did? Are we ready to give up our privilege and sense of entitlement in order to fulfill the gospel mandate? Or would we rather run him over the cliff like the Nazarenes tried to do? Well, it depends on the day, right? Let's admit it: Displacement, whether internal or political, is not our "go to" move. And yet, it's how God calls us and where God grows us. It is God's "go light," the way forward on the path toward spiritual wisdom that leads to social transformation.

Dr. Martin Luther King, got this, prophet that he was. He knew that the path toward civil rights for African Americans in his day called for a displacement, and unsettling of the status quo of the white power structure. But the well-intentioned white, established clergymen of his day, did not. While in the Birmingham City Jail for leading non-violent protests against the discriminatory laws and practices of the land, he received a letter from those white clergymen urging him to stop his non-violent political protesting and to wait. They were not ready for the change and social transformation that Dr. King was helping to lead.

Here is a direct quote from the "Public Statement to Dr. King, on April 12, 1963, signed by 8 white clergymen: "In Birmingham, recent public events have given indication that we all have opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems. However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely."

No, they were not ready, "to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Dr. King responded with his now famous letter* in which he wrote: *"My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This*

"Wait" has almost always meant "Never." It has been a tranquilizing Thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

What is our excuse? Jeremiah wasn't ready for God's call because he was too young. And perhaps because even as young as he sensed how incredibly difficult his work as prophet would be. And yet we hear the Lord calling him, also with the urgency of the immediate: "See, **today** I appoint you, over nations and over kingdoms," said the Lord to young Jeremiah." (Jer.1:10) "Oh no, God, I am not ready. I am too young, I need more time, more training, more preparation. No one will listen to me. Please God, no. What you are asking is too hard..." That is my paraphrase of Jeremiah's response. Too young. Perhaps the folks in the synagogue that day were too old. What is our excuse?

Are we saying "no" or "yes" to Jesus' call? Depends on the day, right? If we are feeling resentful, bitter, resigned or just apathetic, that is a sign we are saying "no" way more than "yes." Here's the good news: That choice is up to us. If you are feeling beat down, whether by personal issues or by the current political morass of our country and our world, try this: Try giving God's call to you, the green light. Accept the "now" of God's call: Feeling "not ready" is part of God's strategy, perhaps. What I know for a fact is this: if you are feeling "not ready" you are in good company with the prophets and saints throughout the Bible and our faith tradition. At the same time, saying "yes" (ready or not) is where we find our agency, our purchase, our way forward. Here's a metaphor inspired by our icy, slippery, treacherous week of subzero cold: Accepting the immediacy of God's call, throwing our hesitations, our need to be in control, and all of our excuses to the wind, is our salt and sand. Saying "yes" to God's call, moment by moment, gives us traction on the black ice under our feet.

Here is the good news spread before us on this Table: Jesus is more than, not less than, we'd ever hope for or want. At this table, bread is more than bread and wine is more than wine.

At this table, scripture is being: fulfilled, refilled, refueled:

In your hearing and having,
 In our tasting and testing
 not there
 not later
 but here and now.

Are you ready?

*Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail" is currently being considered as a possible addition to our Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Confessions*.