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All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Anointing Spirit. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is the second half of the passage that was begun last week - the one where Jesus goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and reads to the congregation from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah - the part about how there is good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind and freedom from oppression. The first half ends with Jesus telling the people, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In today's reading - the second half - we are reminded again of Jesus' proclamation that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing, and we learn what the reaction of the crowd is to this proclamation. Then we hear the rest of the story.

First, the congregation reacts as one: *All* speak well of him and respond with admiration to his message. It's not the first time that people react with wonder - in chapter 2, after the shepherds arrive at the manger, they make known what has been told them about the child and *all* who hear them are amazed; and when Jesus is 12 years old and goes with Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem for the Passover, he winds up in the temple, teaching the teachers, and *all* who hear him are amazed at his understanding and his answers. You can imagine the buzzing from the people in the Temple and in the synagogue: "Isn't this cousin Joseph's son?" they ask. They are proud of their hometown boy made good.

Then Jesus interrupts all the wondering voices with a second proclamation, saying, "Now I suppose you want me to prove to you that I am the fulfillment of the Isaiah passage by doing some of the same miracles here that I did in Capernaum." And then he says, "No prophet is acceptable in his home country." It's the first time he is identified as a prophet in Luke, but it will bring him rejection rather than acceptance in the place where he is well-known.

And here's why he will be rejected: Jesus tells the crowd about 2 famous prophets - Elijah and Elisha - using, of all the possible stories about them, two stories about ministry done to people who were NOT part of the people of Israel - the widow of Zarephath, not an Israelite - and Naaman, the Syrian. By using these stories, Jesus implies that he, too, has a ministry that is aimed at those beyond the borders of his hometown.

This is Luke telling us that Jesus' ministry is available to *all* - Jews and Gentiles. Jesus will not be a prophet who serves the special interests of his hometown, but instead, will be a messenger of good news for the whole world, especially those who are vulnerable.

Once again, *all* of the people who have heard Jesus have the same reaction. But this time they are full of anger. Why? In his reading from Isaiah, it is important to know what Jesus did not read. Isaiah goes on after the first 2 verses of chapter 61 to tell of the day when the Lord will crush all Israel's enemies under-foot and restore Israel to its rightful place.

Jesus could have read that part. But he doesn't. He's not thinking locally, but globally. He's not giving a nationalistic sermon about making Israel great again, but declaring that God loves *all* the world and especially those who are poor.

To further emphasize his point, Jesus speaks of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Both of them took God into places where it was thought that God did not and would not inhabit. By using them along with the singular passage from Isaiah, Jesus declares his own ministry to be one of inclusion as well. But when the people being included turn out to be the poor and captive and oppressed whom we don't like or don't trust or whom we fear - then it doesn't take long for those listening to his words to change from awe to rage.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

God heals in Capernaum but not in Nazareth? God favors Syrians, not Israelites?
That's heresy!

And you know what happens to heretics.

Well, the crowd is so furious that they drive him out of the synagogue, and down the road and out of town to the edge of a cliff. They are so mad that they are ready to kill him!

The truth is hard to hear sometimes. And the truth is that this God loves *all* God's children - passionately and relentlessly - and that includes you and me and every tribe and language and people and nation!

So let's go back to Isaiah for a minute, and imagine what Jesus might have read to us here - in our own idiom: (paraphrased from Nadia Bolz-Weber)

"The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor -

- to bring gifts of fine wine and rich food to those who exist only on canned goods and day-old Panera bread because that's what we give out at the church
- to bring living water to the people of Flint, Michigan and everywhere people do not have clean water
- to endow us with a sense of worth that has nothing to do with bank accounts and status
- to tell bank janitors everywhere that the CEOs have re-distributed all their own pay raises and bonuses and stock options to them
- to restore the dignity of the 99% AND of the 1%

"The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to release the captives -

- to remove the feeling of worthlessness from the depressed
- to free the addict from the pill, the bottle, the laptop, the poker table
- to bring rest to the sleep-deprived parents of babies
- to free those wrongly imprisoned by a justice system often lacking in actual justice
- to give a sense of belonging to the alienated
- to save us from having to prove ourselves
- to remove all resentments from those who can't let go of the past

"The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to bring recovery of sight to the blind -

- to forever change the way we see those whose abilities differ from our own
- to help us see the ways that we separate ourselves from others in order to be 'right'
- to allow us to see who we really are, to glimpse the image of God in ourselves and others
- to give us a glimpse of heaven in the here and now, to show us that the Kingdom of God is at hand
- to show us what it looks like to love what God loves and like God loves
- to allow us to see ourselves as God see us, to know that there really is no longer a 'them' but only an 'us'

"The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to bring freedom to the oppressed -
- the over-worked, the under-appreciated, the last chosen, the unlovely,
the despised and unseen, the overly-proud, the lonely.

"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."