

Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

**PRAYER:** Your law is perfect, O God; your ways are just. We praise you for Christ, who makes known your Word. Gold's value is nothing compared to the salvation you offer. The sweetness of honey is but a foretaste of the feast you prepare. Made alive by your mercy and renewed in your Spirit, we come adoring your goodness, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** Paul declares that "as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Friends, affirm your baptism and be made one in Christ, since in Christ we are forgiven.

**OFFERTORY SENTENCE:** It is good for us to be reminded often of the truth the Psalmist pass along to us that "The earth is the Lord and all that is in it, the world and those who dwell therein." (Psalm 24:1)

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O God of wonder and infinite grace. God who loves all souls, regardless of their history, their ethnicity, their struggles and even their sins, we marvel at how great your love is. How soon we forget that we can love others and others can love us because you first loved us. Without your love, no one could love their children or their spouses, or their friends, nor even love you.

Your love cuts through all the baggage we carry, all the nonsense we espouse as the truth, all the posturing, and anything else that demeans you or ourselves or others. How true it is that especially when contemplating your love, we see as though "through a glass dimly". So much distorts how we see you, and others and especially ourselves. In our anxiety, and fear we claim so called truths about your love that simply are false. We injure and push away so many people who simply want to know your divine love.

Even though Jesus declared from the cross "that it is finished", we demand more effort from others to reach our expectations of inclusion in your love. How presumptuous that is. How dare we put qualifications and expectations on your free grace.

We have distorted your gospel. Making it out to be about earning our way in. Making you seem so vengeful and angry, when your Son Jesus simply came and offered us, no pleaded with us to come and participate you're your good kingdom. Why O God, when Jesus describes your kingdom as a party, like a wedding, do we act and preach like it is a burden, or a somber thing like a funeral. Where, O God, is our joy. When O God will we cease to strive to gain something we already have; namely your love and acceptance?

Forgive us Lord, and help us to stop thinking we are the ones who are the gate keepers to your grace. Help us we plead, to urge those who are living in hellish situation to come and find the freedom, the peace, the hope they so long for.

Grant us wisdom and resources to make a difference in our community in moving it from darkness to light. End we pray hunger, poverty and addiction, that stalks so many places in our town. We read in your word that your coming will bring new wine and abundant grain, and so we pray that the instruments of death, like drug paraphernalia, will be turned to opportunity, and food, and hope.

Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Jesus said that the scriptures were fulfilled in the hearing of his home village; so why do we carry on like we are still waiting. We have good news for the poor, we declare release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and that the oppressed may be set free. Grant us a surety in our hearts that this time, this moment, is the year of the Lord's favour.

**BENEDICTION:** O Christ, you have blessed the members of your body with many and diverse gifts. Now send us forth to bear witness to the oneness of our God and the unity of your church. You have given none of us all the gifts for bringing your kingdom to earth. But you have given each of us some gift for bringing your kingdom to earth. Therefore, let us not hold back, lamenting the gifts we do not have; but let us press ahead, employing the gifts we do have. Amen.

Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 4:14-21  
“Setting the Stage”

Former Secretary of Labour Raymond Donovan tells about a personal experience aboard Air Force One. He was in the back-passenger compartment of the plane, while President Reagan was in the front compartment. The phone rang in the back compartment and a voice said, “Mr. Donovan, the president would like you to join him for lunch.” So, Secretary Donovan got up, straightened his tie, and headed to the front of the plane to have lunch with the president.

All the while thinking how important he was to have been asked to have lunch with the president. Just as Secretary Donovan entered into the presidential compartment of the plane, the red phone rang, the presidential hotline. Wow-what a moment to be with the president. The president picked up the phone and said, “Yes-uh huh-yes. What are my options?” Donovan’s heart nearly stopped. His mind raced at what major event was just now transpiring.

Then his bubble burst when the president said, “OK. I’ll have the iced tea!” and then he hung up. (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p.181) Egos are a funny thing, aren’t they? They can blow up so quickly, and be deflated just as quickly. Maybe not all of us, but certainly a great number of us, want to be significant. Have you noticed that sometimes people leave organizations, or change jobs, primarily because they want to be significant?

There is also a movement in our society in which we try to make a particular geographical location special. So, we hang up plaques commemorating people, and events; in the hope that such history will bring significance to that location. I once saw a very funny cartoon in which a plaque was hung stating “George Washington slept here”. What made it funny was it was hung on the end of a church pew.

Location is very important in how it impacts our level of significance. We have an expression to describe someone who moves from a place of significance to one of insignificance. We like to say, “He or she is a small fish in a big pond.” When Jesus walked this earth, there were within easy walking distance, a great number of small ponds.

Josephus, the Jewish Historian, writes that at this time, there were no less than 400 cities and villages in Galilee, and Jesus was gaining fame in all of them. Finally, after some time, Jesus comes home to Nazareth. He comes to the synagogue where his family and friends gathered for worship, and religious instruction. It is the synagogue where Jesus received his religious instruction, and likely had his bar-mitzvah.

Being the famous returning son, Jesus is selected to read the lesson from the scroll, and he selects Isaiah 61:1-2. Actually, I need to make a small point here about the selection of this particular passage. Most scholars point out that the Jewish faith had a lectionary, or schedule of scripture lessons.

Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

It is very probable that Jesus, by divine planning, comes to his home synagogue on the very day this passage comes up for reading. Either way it is amazing how Jesus works his ministry with such timing. The passage was a good choice, since these words were at the heart of the Jewish hope. The passage speaks of God's anointing, and blessing of his people.

In many ways this passage was, and is; the feel-good section of the bible for the Jewish nation. When he finished reading, he handed back the scroll and simply sat down. The people in the synagogue just sat and stared at him. They had heard so much about his journeys around neighbouring villages that they wondered about him. Is this the guy that made the blind to see, the deaf to hear and the lame to walk?

Yes, he read well, but what is so special about this guy? Then Jesus makes a comment, or better, a reaction to the reading, "This scripture has come true before your very eyes!" The congregation's reaction to his reading is hard to glean from the passage, because we are told only that they spoke well of him, and were amazed at his eloquence. Some observers wondered how this "son of a carpenter" could speak like this.

Maybe I need to clarify something important at this point. The Greek word that is often translated for "carpenter", in reference to Joseph, is actually not correct. The word really means labourer. Joseph could have been any number of things that relates to working with your hands, or physical labour. In other words, people saw Joseph as a common labourer, and not of high value.

This level of evaluation would then be passed on to Jesus. He is just the son of a common labourer. Who is this man? Is this really the same little boy who grew up among us? And what does he mean, "This passage is fulfilled in our sight!" Is he trying to identify himself as the fulfillment of this critical piece of prophecy? I think we can safely assume that the room was a buzz with: questions, anticipation, and an unspoken expectation. They expected, as his home town, to receive something unique, something special from him.

If this were to happen today, the town leaders of Nazareth might install signs on the road way, "Nazareth: home town of Jesus, son of Joseph". Actually, this is what they do in Israel, trying to draw tourists. However, Jesus sees into their hearts, and gets right to the core of the matter, "a prophet is without honour in his home town." It is a clear reference to the fact that the Old Testament prophets were often murdered by their own people.

Jesus goes on to state, in shocking terms, that: just because they are from his home town, just because they saw him grow up, and just because this is the synagogue of his youth, they have no special claim on him. Nazareth is just like all those other 400 villages and towns in Galilee. They hold no more significance than anyone else. As if he was rubbing salt into a wound, Jesus goes even further.

He mentioned two incidents from the Old Testament. In Elijah's time during a devastating famine, there were many widows who needed help, but Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath.

Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

In Elisha's day, he was called upon to help Naaman, a leper, get healed when there were hundreds of lepers in Israel. The stinging part of Jesus' words is the fact that this widow, and Naaman, were both Gentiles; that is, outsiders to the Jewish faith.

Jesus makes the point that God bypassed those who believed they had a special position with God, namely Israelites, and went and healed outsiders; Gentiles of all things. In other words, you people from Nazareth, have no special claim on me; even though I grew up among you, and played with you, and worshipped with you. You cannot presume special status because you are Nazarene, or Galilean, or Israelites.

The crowd was furious. For generations, they had read this passage from Isaiah, had heard sermons about it, and had it instilled in them that they were special by the mere fact of their birth, or their geography. They thought these words of Isaiah were meant specifically for them as Israelites. Now, this former son of theirs has the gall to challenge all of this. He suggests that other villages, not historically connected to him, deserve more of him than they do.

But horrors of horrors, even Gentiles deserve some of God's grace, some of Jesus' teaching and healing. How dare he tell us that we are not more significant than others? So, they respond by forcibly expelling him from the synagogue, and rushing him to a cliff to kill him. Thus, begins a theme of Jesus' ministry; that Jesus challenges the special status of Israel, and it creates enemies for him.

"A prophet is without honour in his home town." No one likes to hear such a blunt assessment of their status; especially when everything we hold near and dear is set aside by someone who we believe should agree with us. Nazareth was willing to kill Jesus, rather than acknowledge his authority and his calling. They were not prepared to see Isaiah's monumental words fulfilled in anyone's life but their own.

They were not prepared to see the grander plan of God. They were in a word, selfish; selfish with Jesus, and with his ministry. The same danger exists for the church. We can be tempted to believe that we have exclusive claim to Christ's grace. We might extend recognition that God is at work in like-minded communities, like other Baptist churches, but maybe not other denominations.

We might become jealous that Christ is busy: releasing captives, healing the blind, and freeing the oppressors in other places rather than in our own back yard. And then when a prophet arises in our midst to suggest why this may be, we too might be tempted to point out their own flaws; "Physician heal thyself", rather than accept the truth. The truth we perhaps don't want to hear is that Christ is bigger than us, than this church, than this denomination, and indeed bigger than the universal church, and bigger than the world.

At no time can we ever claim to control who, or where Christ extends his grace. If you truly think about it; after what Christ has done for us by giving himself to the cross at Calvary, who among us can claim anything at all from him. Grace by its very nature means, we do not deserve it.

Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

We cannot earn God's favour, no matter what we do, or who we are; so how dare we try to dictate who deserves God's favour. The church, no matter what its title, be it Baptist or whatever, is not the gate keeper to the flow of grace.

We can, if we so choose, be one of many conduits that Christ can use to shower his grace on people. People who are not Baptists, or from our villages, but people Christ died to redeem, just as much as he died to redeem us. Why are these thoughts and words so important? Why does it become essential that we be reminded of our status in God's Kingdom?

Maybe because like those of Nazareth, we forget that we were once the lost that Christ came to save, or that we might begin to see the world as a place of us against them. That we might forget the bondage that once held us and no longer value the breath of freedom. In his book *Ghost Soldiers*, Hampton Sides tells the story of a dramatic mission during World War II.

On January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1945, 121 hand-selected Army Rangers slipped behind enemy lines in an attempt to rescue 513 American and British POW's. POW's who had spent three years in a hellish prison camp near the city of Cabanatuan. Sides describes the first effects of liberation as chaos and fear. The prisoners were too mentally brittle to understand what was taking place. Some actually scurried away from their liberators.

One prisoner, Bert Bank, refused to budge, even when a Ranger walked right up to him and tugged his arm. "C'mon, we're here to save you," he said. "Run for the gate." Bank would not move. The Ranger looked into his eyes and saw that they were vacant, registering nothing. "What's wrong with you?" he asked. "Don't you want to be free?" A smile formed on Bank's lips as the meaning of the words became clear, and he reached up to the outstretched hand of the Ranger.

The Rangers searched all the barracks for additional prisoners, then shouted, "The Americans are leaving. Is there anybody here?" Hearing no response, they left. But there was one more POW named Edwin Rose. Edwin had been on latrine duty and somehow missed all the shooting and explosions. He wandered back to his barracks; he failed to notice the room was empty and he lay down on his mat and went to sleep.

Edwin had missed the liberation. But there was a reason why. You see Edwin was deaf. On that raid, four Americans died in the rescues; two Rangers in the firefight and two prisoners due to poor health. The freed prisoners marched 25 miles and boarded ships home. With each step, their stunned disbelief gave way to soaring optimism. Even Edwin Rose made it. When he woke up, he realized what had happened, and he walked to freedom.

The ministry of Christ can ill afford us mistrusting, and running away from the work of liberation. We must at times set aside our misguided ideas of what grace looks like and where it can be extended. That responsibility rests with Christ alone. Ours is but to recognize that the words Jesus read have indeed come true in our hearing.

Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Good news does get preached to the poor, captives are released, the blind see, the downtrodden are freed and this is the time of the Lord's favour. Come, embrace the truth wherever it is expressed and celebrate every instance of Christ's grace as it flows into our community, whether it is in these four walls or anywhere else he chooses to free the captive.