

I.

I was ordained at the church I grew up in. My father preached the ordination sermon. And the people that had rocked me in the nursery and taught me Sunday school, the leaders who had traveled on youth mission trips with me and sent me care packages in college filled the pews to pray for me and bless me in this next faithful step. It was a beautiful day.

But there were funny parts as well. Like my best friend who didn't really know what ordination was, not being a church person herself. In her mind she had equated it with being knighted in England. As if, when I had finished kneeling, I would rise, Sir Kristin the Brave. Another friend brought a toy sword to the service to play along.

Or there was the moment, after the service had ended, when we went to the fellowship hall for a reception. We are, after all, Baptist. And it is hard to know if anything important has occurred unless you have a meal before or after. I was busy greeting everyone and thanking them for coming when the woman who I had sat with every Sunday growing up as my father preached and my mother sang in the choir pulled me gently over to the dessert table. "You have to see your cake!" she said, proudly. And there it was. "Happy Ordination Day" was carefully written out in blue icing across the top. And underneath they had had my baby picture somehow transferred onto the icing. So that looking down I saw my baby blonde curls and chubby cheeks looking back up at me. As if to remind me that even though I was now a "reverend," the people gathered in that room knew me from before all of that.

II.

After Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, he is tempted in the desert by Satan. And then he makes his way home. But he makes his way home a different person. Now he is

someone who has seen the world and how it works and has decided to take a different path. Someone who has been tempted by wealth and power and fame and decided to go in a different direction. He goes home changed.

As he makes his way back home, filled by the power of the Holy Spirit, people in the nearby counties begin to take note. Jesus is invited to teach in their synagogues and people from miles around start coming to hear what he has to say. By the time he reaches Nazareth, the word has gotten around: This Jesus is something special!

Entering the synagogue where he grew up, he is invited to read Scripture. Standing on the special platform for readers, he decides to read from the prophets and is handed the scroll of Isaiah. Unrolling it, he finds the place he wants, and begins to read. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach 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.”

The people smile. They know this Scripture. It is one of their favorites. It is always good to remember how God was faithful to those who were living in exile. How he brought them home. Some have heard it said that this Scripture is a description of the Messiah who is to come. And they have been praying that one day they might see God’s Anointed bring this message of good news to them as well.

But they never could have expected what happened next. For after he stops reading, Jesus rolls the scroll back up, returns it to the scroll bearer, and sits down, assuming the position of one who is about to preach. Everyone sits at the edges of their pews, completely spellbound.

They've heard from their neighbors that little Jesus has grown into quite the preacher. And they can't wait to hear him for themselves.

"Today," Jesus says, "this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The congregation sits in stunned silence. Is Jesus saying that he is the one they have been waiting for? Jesus, who they used to pass honeycomb to keep him quiet during the prayers? Jesus, who they watched grow up from a spindly legged boy into a strapping young man? Jesus is the Messiah?

They aren't sure what to make of it. But they know they are excited. If he will be the one to release the captives of Rome. If he will be the one who heals the blind and offer forgiveness of sins. Well...that is good news! Especially for them, the ones closest to him! They all begin to smile and shuffle in their seats. Jesus' mother nods at her son and gives him a wink as if to say, "Well done!" The good news has been proclaimed and everyone is surprised and pleased!

III.

And it all would have been fine. It all would have been great, even. If Jesus had just stopped there. But he kept preaching. And it is hard to be a prophet in your own hometown. It is hard to say difficult things to people you love. It is hard to tell your elders that they may have gotten something wrong. It is hard to teach people who used to change your diapers. But Jesus tries.

"This is indeed good news," Jesus says. "But it isn't good news just for us. The good news I am bringing isn't going to stop here in Nazareth. After all, God is bigger than that. Remember Elijah and Elisha, those good old prophets in the old days? Let's not forget our Holy

Scriptures and the stories they tell. It's easy to skip over the parts we don't like. But we have to remember. Remember how Elijah went to that poor widow in Zarephath? How he went right past the boundaries of Israel into enemy territory and found that starving woman? Taking what she offered, Elijah made sure that they both were fed. Or what about Elisha? Remember how Naaman, a leader in the Syrian army—those enemies of Israel—remember how he suffered from leprosy but Elisha healed him? Friends, there were hungry and hurting people in Israel in those days. But Elijah and Elisha didn't help them. They helped the others. The people that the Israelites actually hated. And what I am trying to say to you today is that the kingdom of God is going to be bigger than you think. The healing, the forgiveness, the release and the favor is **not just for you.**"

The mood in the synagogue shifts. Jesus can feel it. The people who were nodding before are now shooting him the evil eye. Finally, someone stands up, having heard enough and marches out of the back doors. Others begins to follow.

"Who does he think he is?" Jesus hears one man grumble as he pushes his way past him. But it doesn't end there. Instead, the angriest people make their way to the front, grab Jesus under the arms and drag him down the aisle and out the door. "How dare you talk about God like that in our place of worship!" they demand. And they pull and push him down the streets. Past his old neighborhood. Past the streets where he used to play. Past the place he used to buy those roasted chickpeas with his friends. Out to the city limits, ready to push him off the cliff.

IV.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have Jesus preach in our churches today. What would his sermon be about? If Luke is right, this first sermon Jesus preached in his

hometown was his mission statement. It was the sermon that would shape the rest of his life. It was his vision of what it looked like to live and work in and for the kingdom of God. So I imagine that if he preached today he would say many of the same things. He would certainly remind us that God is still working to bring good news to the poor. To remind us that our worth and the worth of others lies outside our bank accounts. To remind us that those to whom much is given, much is required.

Jesus would still proclaim release to all those being held captive, whether it is addicts who are captive to a bottle or a needle or a laptop, those who have been thrown into prison and then forgotten, or those who are held captive by the mistakes of their past.

Jesus would remind us that God is still working to bring sight to the blind so that we can see each other clearly again, free of the labels and the boxes we like to put one another in. To allow us to see ourselves as God truly sees us.

Jesus would certainly still say, as Nadia Bolz Weber paraphrases, “The Spirit of the Lord has sent him 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 parts of ourselves that are so small.” That sounds like good news.

But Jesus probably wouldn't stop there. Because Jesus didn't stop there before. So I wonder if, when Jesus preached to us, some of what he would say would make us mad? We like to think that we would behave better than his friends and neighbors in Nazareth. But I'm not so sure. Because we, like them, really hate when we are reminded that God is God and that we are not. That God can act in ways that we might not approve of. That God's love and God's mercy

might actually extend beyond our own. We don't always want to hear that God might just care about the people that we hate as much as God cares about us.

If Jesus came to our church today and preached a sermon from this pulpit, he probably wouldn't talk about widows in Sidon or Syrian soldiers. Maybe instead he would talk about immigrants. Or people whose relationships or experiences are different from our own. Maybe he would talk about people who speak different languages and live in different countries or people who worship differently from us.

Jesus would probably tell us that God reaches out to those we have decided to hate just as much as he reaches out to us. That God seeks to heal and help them just as much as he seeks to heal and help us. That the good news is often found, not where we are, but with the people who make us the most uncomfortable.

Oh my. That is not an easy sermon to hear. It wasn't then and it isn't now. Saying things like that is enough to get you fired. Or... *maybe*...if you say in the wrong place at the wrong time, saying things like that is enough to get you killed.

V.

Yes, preaching can be a perilous thing. But, my friends, as Christians we believe that the message of Jesus is just as important and real for us today as it was for those who heard his first sermon in person. And the call of Jesus is just as real for us today as it was for them, even when we don't want to hear it. We can rage about the message all we want. And we can shake our fists at the sky.

But right when our anger and outrage at the scandal of the gospel pushes us to the very edge of the cliff, Jesus passes right through us. As if to say that even now the boundaries and the

barriers we are trying to erect are like smoke and air to him. Powerless in the face of the great and terrible mercy of our God. **Today**, Jesus says. **Today** these words are fulfilled in your hearing. And then he looks at us and raises his eyebrows...as if to say: “Now what will you do about it?”

AMEN.

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