

Looking Out
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Community Church of Providence
February 2, 2025

Psalm 71:1-6
Luke 4:14-30

The things that captivate and excite our minds are unique to each of us – sometimes these sparks – even when we are children – send us on a life course! I have noticed these different passions in my children, as I’m sure you have in children you know well. For Leo, it’s science, and for Ned, it’s music and storytelling. DW, who is 3, has a special inclination toward historical artifacts, like statues and ancient ruins, which we see from time to time in local museums or National Geographic picture books.

One day, while we were hiking up in Greenville, he saw one of the colonial stone walls out in the woods that we stumble upon so often here in Rhode Island, and he cried out with glee, “Mommy, it’s an ancient!” He was so pleased.

When we hold these texts in our hands, we hold “an ancient” – though of course copied and translated and retranslated – and it stirs my soul to think about Jesus reading these same texts in Hebrew, as we heard today about the scroll of Isaiah. I picture him praying the psalms, which we too pray.

One way that I find new meaning in the psalms is to pray them on behalf of someone else, to change the “I” in the psalm to the name of someone I love (or someone I am trying to love more). For example, if we pray today’s psalm, Psalm 71, in this way, we might say:

In you, O Lord, Tommy takes refuge; let him never be put to shame. In your righteousness, deliver him and rescue him.

Be to Meri a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save her, for you are her rock and her fortress.

On this day that we hear about in Luke’s gospel – a day of rejection by the people of his hometown – Jesus was surely depending upon God as his refuge. This scripture takes place near the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus is sent by the Spirit into the wilderness for a time of intense testing, and when he comes out of that wilderness, he is filled with God’s power and begins to teach in the synagogues throughout Galilee.

Finally, he comes to his hometown of Nazareth, and in the synagogue he stands up to read from the prophet Isaiah, declaring the mission that God gave him: to bring good news, release the captives, restore sight, and free the oppressed, proclaiming God’s joyful love.

Initially, the people were enthusiastic and praised his words, but then, he kept speaking... and he began to push buttons, and these well-meaning people became furious. What happened

next is shocking! Filled with rage, they ran him out of town and right up onto a cliff so that they might push him over to his death. “Look out, Jesus!” we might want to shout. But Jesus passed right through their angry hands and went on his way and about his mission.

The question I have is, “Why in the world were they so angry that they tried to kill Jesus that day? What did he unearth in his speaking to them?”

I think Jesus hit upon something universal in the human story and gave them a glimpse of themselves (of ourselves) that they didn’t want to recognize: he uncovered the human tendency to prefer “us” to “them” – even to *create* an us and them – to see the world as insiders and outsiders, to partition ourselves.

As Jesus taught these neighbors about his own mission, he made it clear that they, even though they were his hometown, were not at the center of what he was doing. Jesus reminded them of Elijah who was sent to help a widow in Sidon, about 120 miles north of Jerusalem, even though Israel was experiencing a drought, as well. And of Elisha who healed Naaman, the Syrian, a commander in a foreign military, while all the while, there were people in their “own” country suffering from the same disease.

Jesus’ implication is that God’s focus is much broader than us, and that de-centering of themselves – by a person they thought of as their own – made them angry.

We find this expansion of the center in both of the stories of Jesus’ life in Luke chapter 4. In the wilderness, Jesus is faced with a temptation to keep himself completely at the center, to focus all of his energies on self-aggrandisement and personal power. And then here, as he visits his hometown, he is pressured to give special focus to this personal circle of people. Yet, despite these pressures, Jesus keeps his eyes turned outward, toward all of God’s people.

It seems to me that this story today gives us a choice, too: we can stay huddled up with the crowd, or we can follow Jesus and walk out through their midst.

Everything, everything urges us to think about ourselves, to put ourselves and our personal needs, our own neighborhoods, our own state, our own religion first, and so on, to draw barrier upon barrier of protection around ourselves. I learned recently that one of the most difficult challenges to creating affordable housing in Rhode Island is the resistance of communities to change their zoning laws.

Jesus, trouble-maker that he was, and trouble-maker that he still is!, encourages us in the reverse, to look out: look outward for the needs of others and prioritize them, even when it costs us something. Because it does cost to help others – just as it opens up our lives and souls to blessing.

And this text encourages us to look out in another way: to look beyond all these false human partitions – when we search for friendship, for community, for partners, for common ground. Sometimes the people with whom we find the greatest kinship may not share our language or place of origin nor our economic class or religious background. (I learn that weekly in this congregation.)

So today, let us pray that the mission of Jesus that he announced on that day in his hometown – a mission to the poor, the captives and the oppressed, so captivates our hearts that

we will go along with him.

Amen