

“Was It Something I Said?”

3 February 2019: 4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 4:21-30

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“For God is not an object that I deal with, but a subject who speaks to and addresses me.

It is in learning to listen to God speak that I become familiar with and participate in basic spirituality”

(Eugene Peterson, Subversive Spirituality, p. 27).

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We often speak new information to others. Sometimes we tell people our heart and feelings. When someone tells a spouse of fifty years, “I love you,” this is not big news. Rather, it affirms what is and will be. It is these kinds of declarations that give worship its power and reminds us of what we already know. Hear this story:

The Mariner I space probe was launched from Cape Canaveral on 28 July 1962 towards Venus. After 13 minutes' flight a booster engine would give acceleration up to 25,820 mph; after 44 minutes 9,800 solar cells would unfold; after 80 days a computer would calculate the final course corrections and after 100 days the craft 28 would circle the unknown planet, scanning the mysterious cloud in which it bathed.

However, with an efficiency that is truly heartening, Mariner I plunged into the Atlantic Ocean only four minutes after takeoff. Inquiries later revealed that a hyphen had been omitted from the instructions fed into the computer. 'It was human error', a launch spokesman said. This hyphen cost \$18.5 million (THE GREATEST MATHEMATICAL ERROR: from a Paul Corder e-mail).

A reason we note this piece of news is it reminds us what we are doing in worship. The missing “hyphen,” like the Tower of Babel story (Genesis 11) portrays a human attempt to advance the world without reference to God. In Genesis 11, people united to build a tower reaching the heavens. A bad idea, according to Yahweh. So, Yahweh scrambled human language. When people overreach, bad things can and do happen. Perhaps this is why Yahweh sets boundaries for God’s creation.

Worship is many things, but fundamentally worship gathers us to remind us that God has created and is creating. Worship is a time for us to offer God thanks/praise. Worship is where we find a place in God’s creative system and play a faithful role in God’s purposes. In a nutshell, worship reminds us who God is, who we are, and what our relation to God is.

Today’s Gospel lesson recounts Jesus’ first act of public ministry. Jesus reminds listeners about God’s promise in an Isaiahian text. Jesus returns from the wilderness of temptation, and next attends synagogue with his family. Isaiah tells God’s promises to and for Israel. All was going well, according to Luke. Hear today’s text:

[21] Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” [22] All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph's son?” [23] 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’.”

[24] And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. [25] 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; [26] yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to

a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. [27] There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

[28] When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. [29] 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. [30] But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way (Luke 4:21-30).

What created the intense anger in the synagogue? We just read: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” Was it something he said? My guess is yes. On the surface, it is difficult to understand such a synagogue outburst. After all, they were all well acquainted with Jesus and his family. Yet, plainly, Jesus hit a nerve directly. Jesus reminded those in Nazareth about a God they knew, but forgotten. God is God of all people and not just some.

To start, Jesus quotes a proverb: “Physician heal thyself.” Then Jesus tells them that they will say, “Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.” Jesus focused the listener’s attention. Jesus was saying: “Don’t worry about me and don’t worry about what I can or have done. You need to pay attention to what God tells us in our (your) scriptures.” “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” Jesus knew what Mark Twain would write 1900 years later: “Familiarity breeds contempt—and children.” It is hard to be prophetic with one’s own family and friends. Ask any parent. Ask any friend.

After this, Jesus relates two stories about Hebrew prophets. The first pertained to Elijah. Yahweh sent Elijah to a widow’s house in Ba’al country. She is clearly poor and Gentile. Elijah has reason to shun her, but he did not. In fact, she fed him. He then healed her son. Israel in Elijah’s time endured drought and famine. The Lord cared for both prophet and a Gentile. Jesus then added another story enraging the Nazareth synagogue—how Elisha healed a Syrian/Gentile army officer. Each story infuriated Jesus’ listeners. They tried to kill him. Noticeably, no one slept through this sermon.

A prophet rescues, not hometown folk, but outsiders—Jewish enemies. Blatantly, Jesus’ point became hideously clear to those present. This God of which Jesus spoke was God of Israel; but also, a God of even enemies of Israel. This did not sit well with the synagogue worshipers and this is where the brow of the hill comes in.

Whether or not we like it, worship reminds us about the nature of God that we revere. Jesus told the people in Nazareth long ago that their God is the God of the Jews and the Gentiles. Today, perhaps, God reminds us that God loves all people and wills their salvation, just as God wills our salvation. It is not always a conventionally comforting thought that God could love our enemies as he loves us, but this is the nature of our God. God wants human beings to live together in peace and harmony. God also knows that we cannot do this on our own. We have too many doubts about our enemies and too much insecurity even in our best attempts, like sending satellites into space without God. It is God who creates peace, and when we allow God to do this, then our children and we will be the beneficiaries.

As the Civil War was winding down and it was obvious that the Union would win, someone asked President Lincoln how he would treat the southerners after the war was over. He answered, “Like they had never been away.”

“But Mr. President,” the questioner protested, “aren’t we supposed to destroy our enemies?”

Abraham Lincoln's response was a piece of divine wisdom: "Don't we destroy our enemies when we make them our friends?" Amen.

David Neil Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado, TX 76571