

“When the Story Breaks Us”

Luke 4:21-30

There’s a popular internet meme called the ‘buddy Christ.’ You know memes— The pictures posted online with words over them? Like a picture of Jesus with words on top like, “Need an ark? I Noah guy.” The buddy Christ image is a statue of Jesus, smiling and winking while pointing at onlookers with one hand and giving the thumbs-up sign. The buddy Christ inspired t-shirts and bobbleheads. It comes from a parody religious icon in the irreverent film *Dogma*. In the movie, it’s part of a campaign to renew the image of the Catholic Church. Because the crucifix was too depressing, Cardinal Glick (George Carlin), creates the Buddy Christ icon as a more uplifting image of Jesus. It’s safe to say, this is the Jesus the people of Nazareth were expecting. This is not the Jesus who came to them. The New Testament Jesus is a challenging figure. As much as we try to domesticate him and make him like us, he defies our best efforts.

He came to his hometown synagogue with a message. He read from the prophet Isaiah: *The*

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. He said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled.” The promises of God’s jubilee are coming true.

The year of the Lord’s favor or the year of jubilee was an ancient custom prescribed in Leviticus 25. Every 50 years all debts were to be canceled, land was to be given back to original tribal owners, slaves were to be freed, and whatever had gone wrong for the last 49 years would be set right. There’s no record that they actually did this. But, by Jesus’ day this had become a significant theological expression of what God will do with the world... the year of the Lord’s favor is a foretaste of what God will do in the end. God will set things right. Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Jesus was teaching in synagogues around Galilee and was receiving great recognition for his teaching. And the people in Nazareth were impressed with him. They were raving about him. ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s boy?’ But, the message wasn’t over.

Jesus quotes an old proverb— “Doctor, heal yourself.” *Do what you did in Capernaum. Prophets aren’t welcome in their hometown.* Jesus implies that they are only excited about his presence because they are waiting on him to do some miracles— heal somebody or cast out demons. These are not the only signs that Jubilee is here— that the Spirit is upon us. They are expecting special treatment because Jesus is theirs; what they get surprises them.

This is kind of a confusing story. I think Luke does that on purpose. It’s jarring— we’re meant to wonder what made this crowd so angry. Jesus hasn’t healed anyone yet. He hasn’t cast out any demons yet. Right after this story comes the story from Capernaum where Jesus casts out a demon. We assume the scriptures come to us like a new broadcast— this happened, then this, then this.

Maybe Luke doesn’t tell his account of Jesus’ life in temporal progression. He’s building a case. He begins Jesus ministry with a story about what his ministry is all about. It is Spirit led, it is about joy, it is about justice for all, and it is about conflict with the status quo. The healings and exorcisms come after our story today. Today — it’s Jesus himself who is exorcised from his hometown— they take him and try to throw him off a cliff.

Quick aside about Jesus in Capernaum— do what you did in Capernaum. There he cast out a demon from a man in the synagogue. The funny thing about Jesus in the New Testament is that no one knows who he is. His hometown synagogue doesn’t know him. They know him as Joseph’s son. Throughout the gospels his disciples don’t really understand who he is. The religious leaders don’t see it. The politicians crucify him. But, the demons know. They always know who he is. And they’re afraid of him. In Capernaum this man with an unclean spirit says, “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God.” The gospel writers are making a statement here about the power of Jesus and specifically the

power he makes available to his followers. The demons and unclean spirits recognize the power of Jesus because when his transformational teaching takes hold they are rendered powerless.

The people in Nazareth think they know Jesus. He's Joseph's son. "We are his hometown people! We are going to get the goods." They don't know him. Jesus is not their buddy. Jesus reminds them that even when people were starving in Israel, Elijah went to save a starving gentile widow in Sidon. Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian general of his leprosy... though there were probably lepers in Israel. Now, Jews in general had positive relations with Gentiles and they expected that righteous Gentiles would be saved in the end. The rejection of Jesus is not anger at Gentile inclusion but about his unwillingness to play favorites... his unwillingness to give them special favors. They misunderstand Jesus; they don't understand the grace that is more favor than they can imagine. They think Jesus is theirs. And because they think he is theirs they lose him. In their blind anger Jesus passes right through them.

Luke's description of their driving Jesus out of the city to throw him off a cliff is more than a first-century version of a lynch mob. That was the procedure the law required for the stoning of someone no longer fit to be a member of the community of Israel. They effectively excommunicated Jesus, making him a non-Jew, a Gentile. Note the changes in reactions of the people who thought of Jesus as belonging to them in a special way: from attention, to approval, to anger, to murderous action. This is the danger whenever people claim Jesus for their own yet still try to micromanage how Jesus will be Lord over them.

Ravi Zacharias was a grad student at Cambridge, MA when he made a day trip over to Bedford, the hometown of John Bunyan, the writer of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He was not disappointed. In the middle of town there was a life-size statue of the preacher/writer, and his restored house, and a museum, and the church he pastored in the 1600's. Zacharias had a great day wandering around town, praying in the church, examining the house, looking over artifacts in the museum. Finally it was time to go home, but he

lingered in the gift shop of the museum, looking over the various editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress* for sale. He struck up a conversation with the young clerk. He asked her where she was from. Right there in Bedford, born and bred. He asked her about Bunyan and she told him all the vital statistics (when and where born, books written, times in jail, death, etc.). He chatted with her about the different copies of the book available, and she told him all about covers and paper quality and print size. Finally, he asked her what her favorite part of the story was, what bit stuck with her? She said, "Oh, I wouldn't know, I've never read it. It's quite old and boring isn't it?" In today's lesson, Jesus talks about how a "prophet is not without honor except in his hometown." Bunyan was honored; but his teachings are now ignored. Is this true with the church today?¹ Do we honor Jesus even as we let him pass right through us? We honor the signs of his power— we honor the salvation we have received— but as for his teaching — well, we let that pass through us and go on its way.

Forgiving debts. Turning the other cheek. Not judging others. Setting captives free. Loving our enemies.

All these teachings invite us to set ourselves on level ground with others. But, like the people of Nazareth, we enjoy any advantage we can get. Instead of seeing Jesus as a means of looking at the sacred nature of the world, we choose to see Jesus as leverage against the world. As long as we seek privilege through Christ for ourselves against others, he will continue to pass through us unseen.

My friend Kyle Childress has been the pastor of an east Texas church for 30 years. Kyle was raised in West Texas. He was only seven or eight when one of their small-town West Texas heroes came home from Vietnam. He had lived three doors down, was a star on the high school football team, and had been in Kyle's father's Sunday school class before going off to Vietnam. He came back with one leg and a message. God told him, he said, that the war was wrong and that our church and our town needed to change our minds and hearts about racial segregation. Since he was never given the opportunity to stand in the pulpit and testify, he prophesied in casual conversation, but the results were the same: everyone talked about what he said, what had happened to him

over there, and whether or not the war had messed up his head. One Sunday after church Kyle's father commented to his mother, "Perhaps that boy had some mental problems from Vietnam, but that didn't mean that what he said was wrong." Kyle's father was a member of the local school board. Soon after that he began pushing for their schools to be integrated.

In reflecting on that time so long ago, Kyle says, "Though that young Vietnam veteran never considered himself a prophet, I've come to believe that he was. And although our church didn't know what to do with him, he was formed by its members and taught from the nursery on up that God speaks and God calls, and that our job is to "trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."²

Throughout the gospel of Luke and Acts (Luke's 2nd volume), the Spirit of God leads people into conflict. The Spirit provokes and the good news leads them into conflict. Remember in Luke 2 the prophet Simeon speaks over the baby Jesus saying, "This *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many and for a sign which will be spoken against... that the thoughts

of many hearts may be revealed." The truth exposes untruth. Love reveals apathy. Light shines in the darkness. We may not have evidence that a year of Jubilee ever took place. But, I wonder if you could think of evidence in your lifetime of prisoners being set free, or a moment of extraordinary forgiveness, or a time when blind eyes were opened, or that moment when the Spirit fell upon you to lift your heart.

The more we get into scripture the more we will find it challenging our assumptions. The gospel just might break us. Maybe that's a good thing. Hemingway said the world breaks everybody, some are strong at the broken places. A wise rabbi once cracked that we should keep the scriptures close to our hearts so that when our hearts break the word of God falls into the brokenness. There's a lot of brokenness around us... in us. But, the good news is that this is the year of the Lord's favor. The fix is here, and it's for everybody.

¹ Fairless, John; Chilton, Delmer. *The Lectionary Lab Commentary: With Stories and Sermons for Year C* (pp. 65-66). The Lectionary Lab Press. Kindle Edition.

² Kyle Childress, "Expect a Call," article in *The Christian Century*, January 9, 2007.