

When Good News Sounds Like Anything But

Luke 4:21-30

When I was about five I had a hard time getting to sleep one night. The initial reason for my insomnia has long since escaped me, but what has never left me was the sense of increasing panic I felt, as the minutes ticked by and sleep wouldn't come. Now, I've had five year olds who either couldn't or wouldn't sleep, and what usually happens is that they toss and turn a bit, look at a book, sing to themselves, or come and get you to report that they can't sleep, like there's something you can do about it. But they don't panic. That's not the typical reaction for a little kid with insomnia. But there was a reason for my fear. My mother had recently told me about the Sandman, that he would come and put sand in your eyes, but I had it all wrong. I'd had sand in my eyes before, and I knew it was no fun. I thought that it was a threat, a punishment – if you didn't go to sleep when you were supposed to some guy would come to your house and throw sand in your eyes.

Sometimes the story isn't about what you think it's about.

Today's text is the second half of the story we started last week, but like the Sandman, the story may have a different point and purpose than meets the eye. In case you weren't here last week, here is a brief synopsis. Jesus has just returned from the wilderness and has begun his ministry in Galilee where he has amazed and is adored. And then he comes to Nazareth, his hometown, his home synagogue, among people he has grown up with and done work for, and eaten countless potluck suppers with. And quoting from the prophet Isaiah, he goes public: he is the long-awaited one; the one sent by God to set his people free. And they love him, too! Luke writes that they were "amazed at his gracious words." They are every bit as thrilled with him as the folks in the other towns and villages of Galilee are.

But then something happens. Jesus takes a swing at them; he takes a sharp stick and pokes them with it. That's what prompts their violent reaction, not what he has said about himself or what his mission is. They love him, and then they turn on a dime and become homicidally enraged, ready to toss him off the nearest cliff.

Clearly, something has happened that Luke didn't report. One minute Jesus is announcing who he is and what his mission is, that the mild-mannered carpenter's son is really the Messiah sent by God to liberate Israel, and the next he seems to be goading them by telling them that they've been cut out. They don't get a piece of the pie. What happened?

It's not hard to guess what happened, actually. If you've had someone from your hometown rise to fame you understand exactly what happened. At the city limits in Boulder are signs proudly proclaiming that we are the hometown of astronaut Scott Carpenter. Boulder High is the proud alma mater of Glen Gondrezick, who played for the New York Nicks. They are our hometown heroes, they make us famous because they're famous. We get to ride on the coattails of their glory and fame.

The good people of Nazareth were thrilled with Jesus. Wasn't it a wonder that Mary and Joseph's boy was really God's chosen one? They'd wondered all these years how come he'd

never married and opened up his own shop, and now they knew: He was destined for something far greater. He was the anointed one, God's spirit was upon him, just like it was on Moses and Elijah, and now people would always associate the Messiah with Nazareth. Wasn't that something?! People would come from near and far to see Jesus and where he grew up, and, why, they'd probably stop and buy some trinkets from their store or stay at their inn, or visit their own little synagogue to see if Jesus was there that week doing his amazing healings or some such. They were going to get to ride on the coattails of Jesus' glory. Be the beneficiaries of Jesus' blessedness.

And that's when Jesus lowers the boom, tells them that it ain't gonna happen. They aren't as special as they think they are, and he reminds them that there were plenty of widows and lepers around in Israel during Elijah and Elisha's day, and yet God sent one to heal a Gentile leper, and the other to raise the son of a Gentile widow from the dead, while Israel was still in the midst of a drought and famine. God sent them to the other people, the outsiders. Jesus' signs and wonders and blessing weren't for their benefit.

And that's when they decided to do him in.

There are two ways of hearing and understanding this story. The first way is the way that the people in Nazareth did, as a harsh story; a story of judgment. They heard Jesus say to them that they didn't understand who God was or how God worked, and that God was not particularly pleased with them, and they heard it as condemnation. They had gotten their ears boxed, been lectured, slapped down. And so, naturally, they were unhappy. Very unhappy. Unhappy enough to turn a roomful of God-fearing worshippers into a lynch mob.

There are other responses to harsh messages, of course. You can throw the messenger off the cliff, or you can just go elsewhere to find a message you like better. One that is less confrontational, more affirming. One that is all positive, that is all about how God wants only to bless you, bless you, bless you and make your life wonderful and easy. There are plenty of messengers out there who are more than happy to accommodate anyone who just wants to feel good.

But Jesus' message wasn't intended to always make us feel good. He gave a sermon we now call The Beatitudes, but one version includes at least as many 'woes to' as 'blessed are's. He told parables that made us squirm about a dishonest manager and what happened to a rich man when he died. But good news doesn't always have to make us feel good to be good news. Good news can sting and wound and make you feel downright uncomfortable. Here is the thing that we have such a hard time remembering: there is no one-size-fits-all gospel. Good news is only good news if it tells us what we need to hear. People who are beaten down and worn out and excluded and burdened by guilt need to hear that God accepts them unconditionally and welcomes them into the fold and binds up their broken hearts and minds and bodies. The woman caught in adultery hears words of forgiveness. The paralyzed man gets his legs back and his sins forgiven. The 'outsiders' need to hear that they are not outsiders in God's eyes at all.

But insiders, well, insiders sometimes need to be challenged. If you only hear about God's unconditional love and acceptance, if you only hear words of comfort, than it's all too easy to

come to believe that you aren't just special in God's eyes, you're extra special. It's easy to convince yourself that God has no expectations or hopes or dreams for you. God's okay with you staying just the way you are for the rest of your life.

Jesus didn't just come to say that God loves us and accepts us. He came to save us from ourselves and make us more like God. And God is love; pure, perfect love. If you think God's word to us is always safe and easy and comfortable, go back and read the words to the anthem this morning, which allude to the text of today's epistle reading, 1 Corinthians 13. It talks about that pure, perfect love and how hard it is; love in the trenches, love when it is hard work. God has high expectations for us, and when we fail to meet them, when we are arrogant or selfish or violent, or impatient or unjust or unkind, then we can expect that God's message to us is going to have some teeth in it. How else are we going to be grace-filled people? How else are we going to change and grow more and more to look like Christ?

Those teeth aren't out to tear us to pieces or kill us, or cut us off. No matter how sharp those teeth are, it's still good news. No matter how difficult or piercing the message, it is still the gospel. I had a conversation with a woman once who was talking about the difference between the ways she and her husband looked at life's ups and downs, and how they experienced God in them. To him, it's all grace, she said, but I believe there are lessons to be learned. I wondered aloud whether it can't be both? Can't those lessons hard learned be just as much an experience of God's grace as the 'good' things? God loves us enough to push us to grow and change, to trust and love more perfectly. God loves us enough to want better for us.

The tough words from God are never meant to cut us off. They can have an edge, yes, they can be critical and harsh and painful, but they are never words of condemnation. They are words of grace; words of love. They are hard to hear, true, but if we can keep ourselves from throwing the messenger off the cliff, or going off in search of an easier, more pleasant message, if we can let them seep into our bones, find their way into our hearts and tell the truth about us, then that truth will set us free. They will give us life.