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Epiphany 4C
Peace, Seattle
January 31, 2010 epk
Luke 4:16-30

TODAY

There's a lot going in this gospel text, part two of the homecoming scene where Jesus returns as guest preacher to the place where he grew up.

Scholars tell us that the Nazareth of Jesus' day didn't amount to much. A secluded agrarian village set in a basin surrounded by limestone hills, Nazareth consisted of perhaps 200 souls representing maybe a dozen extended families.[1] An unremarkable rural hamlet, Nazareth harbored no great aspirations; it was the kind of small town you'd miss if you blinked while traveling through.

Three or four days' journey from Jerusalem, the seat of power and the center of Jewish spiritual life, Galileans were considered "country bumpkins" by the sophisticated and educated elite of Judah's capitol city. And not only that, their heritage, the "purity" of their lineage, was suspect.

To the jeering question, "COULD ANYTHING GOOD COME FROM NAZARETH?" Judah's answer was an unequivocal NO.

Now any of us who've left home for college or to serve in the armed forces, and then returned home can identify with the tension that resides between the old and the new; between the person I used to be and the person I am now; between the community I once was part of and the community which now seems provincial and out of touch.

Coming home after a life-altering tour of duty or a life-shaping educational experience can make us keenly aware of old habits, attitudes and ways of relating that just don't fit anymore.

Something is different, and chances are good that "something" is me. The experiences I've had, the things I've witnessed, the life lessons I've learned—have reshaped who I am, and the old patterns and rhythms of interacting with family and friends who never left home, are forever changed.

There's something of this tension in today's gospel story. Can you feel it?
Jesus has experienced God's blessing at his baptism, he's gone toe to toe with Satan in the wilderness; filled with the Spirit, he's returned to Galilee as an itinerant preacher, and is getting great reviews. And now he's been tapped to preach to his home congregation.

He stands up, and reads from Isaiah:

> THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME,
> GOD HAS ANOINTED ME, TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR,
> RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, SIGHT TO THE BLIND, FREEDOM FOR THE OPPRESSED
> TO PROCLAIM GOD'S JUBILEE.

Though Luke doesn't preserve the whole sermon he gives us the main point:

TODAY, Jesus tells them, THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING. Which is to say, he *is* the interpretation; the time is now.

[1] John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. 31-35. Cited in article by Kim L. Beckmann, *New Proclamation, Year C, 2009-2010*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) p. 90.

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In Jesus, God's rule is among them, restoring the second rate, the suspect, the impure and illiterate bumpkins to their rightful status as God's chosen ones.
IF ONLY, Jesus seems to say, YOU OPEN YOUR EYES AND SEE!

IN JESUS' SIDING WITH THE POOR AND MARGINALIZED, GOD'S WILL IS REVEALED:
GOD COMES TO US IN JESUS, THE JEW FROM NAZARETH, NOT THE SON OF AN IVY-LEAGUE PHARISEE BUT A DAY-LABORER'S SON; INCARNATING THE MESSAGE THAT THE DOWNTRODDEN ARE THEMSELVES TO BECOME AGENTS OF NEW CREATION.[2]

Writer Virgilio Elizondo calls Jesus **the "reject who rejected rejection."** Jesus has found his home and center in his intimacy with God, who in baptism bestowed upon him "the dignity, confidence, security…and self-respect" out of which Jesus exercises authority.[3]

But why does this sermon of his so <u>infuriate</u> the hometown crowd, who, you'd have thought, would hear <u>good</u> news in what Jesus said?!

Luke's Jesus makes it clear that this good news is <u>not just</u> for his fellow townspeople, or the Jews of Galilee; or even Israel; it's for <u>all</u> marginalized <u>everywhere</u>.

For those in Nazareth content to strive for the legitimacy and "insider status" of their elite brothers and sisters in Judah, Jesus' words come across not as <u>affirmation</u> but <u>indictment</u>.
And in the brouhaha that follows, Jesus adds insult to injury by citing Biblical examples of how their ancestors – his ancestors, too – made the same error.

And that's when things really turn ugly. That's when his home congregation fills with rage and becomes a mob intent on hurling him over a cliff.

Jesus could have spoken in a less direct fashion to avoid ruffling feathers there in Nazareth.
He could have been more of a politician, kept his comments general instead of specific.

Instead of saying, <u>TODAY</u> THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED he could of said
<u>ONE DAY, ONE DAY</u> THIS SCRIPTURE WILL BE FULFILLED.

He could have conducted his ministry using more conventional means and he could have avoided contact with all those people—the poor, the incarcerated, women, lepers, non-Jews, and the like—who might offend his "<u>core constituency</u>."

If he had, my guess is, none of the negativity at Nazareth would have happened, his status as a favored son would have remained intact, and who knows, he might have successfully avoided the cross altogether!

He could have done all these things, and more, in order to be a more palatable prophet.
But by doing so he would have been unfaithful to God's call and his own identity.

He would not be the Christ; and we would not be having this conversation.

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[2] Kim L. Beckmann, *New Proclamation, Year C, 2009-2010*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) p. 91.
[3] Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 1983), 58-64. Cited by Kim L. Beckmann in ibid, p. 91.

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But what Jesus did do that Sabbath morning, is proclaim in very specific terms (there's that word again…) **the kind of ministry he was going to be about.**

He went public with his intentions, and what follows in the rest of Luke's gospel is in many ways an expansion of this first sermon.

After worship today we will gather downstairs for our annual meeting.
And a central piece of our conversation will focus on reviewing the specifics of what we've been about this past year, and imagining together where God is leading us in 2010—including how we will FUND our mission.

If today's gospel teaches us nothing else, it teaches us that enunciating a specific vision for mission comes with risks!

I wrote in Peace Notes about how a certain "fear and trembling" always accompanies the discernment process leading up to the annual meeting each year, because we dare to say as a community:
"We believe God's Spirit is calling us to do X."

What do we base the *"X"* upon? As a community baptized into Christ, we look to the gospel of Jesus to shape our mission agenda in the world.

We're growing and we're changing as a community. We're not the same congregation that we were five years ago when Chris and I arrived with 6-month-old baby Kai in tow. New faces and voices and leaders are part of our fellowship. We've unfurled a new welcome mat on the World Wide Web. The neighborhood and city around us are changing too, and it is ever "our duty and our joy" to be asking:

WHAT IS GOD CALLING US TO BE AND DO NOW?
HOW IS THE SPIRIT EQUIPPING US NOW?
HOW WILL OUR VISION GUIDE OUR MISSION NOW, IN THE COMING YEAR?

Perhaps the riskiest word Jesus uttered in that synagogue that Sabbath morning was the word **TODAY**. Not TOMORROW, not SOME DAY, but TODAY.

By committing ourselves to continue living out his gospel in specific ways TODAY and each day of the year ahead, we claim the same Spirit and power that animated Christ's life and ministry.

- **But it won't happen without you.**
- **It's only theory without you.**
- **It'll just stay on paper without you.**

Today, God extends us a personal invitation to use the Spirit's power-filled gifts for the sake of our neighbors, our selves, and our world.

What will our answer be? Amen.