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PRAYER: Lord Jesus, come into our midst now, into our anxious, chaotic, and alarming world—the world you so love. Come to us in, with, and under your Word, and give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and lips to proclaim your message of liberation from all that blinds and binds us. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

There's a lot going in the gospel today, where Jesus delivers a sermon in the town where he grew up.

The reunion begins well, but ends poorly, and we're left wondering, **WHY?**

Any of us who've left home for college, career, or service to country, and then returned home can identify with the tension that resides between the old and the new.

Returning home after a life-altering experience can make us keenly aware that old habits, attitudes and ways of relating 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 way I see the world and my role in it is forever changed.

There's something of this tension in today's gospel story. Do you feel it?

- Jesus experienced Divine affirmation at his baptism.
- He'd gone toe-to-toe with Satan in the wilderness.
- He'd launched his ministry in Galilee to great reviews.

And today, tapped by leaders in his home congregation, he stands in the pulpit, and takes for his text a reading from Isaiah:

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

Luke doesn't preserve the whole sermon but he does give us the main point:

> **TODAY, says Jesus, THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED**
> **IN YOUR HEARING. TODAY.**

Which is to say, HE IS the fulfillment!
TODAY, IN ME, GOD'S REIGN HAS BEGUN AMONG YOU.

It's a risky statement; an audacious one.

Jesus goes as far out on a limb as he can get without falling off.
And before long they're ready to PUSH him off!

WHY? Why does this message so infuriate the hometown crowd?

(1) For starters, Jesus makes it clear: this good news he's announced is not just for them; neither is it meant only for the Jewish people living under the thumb of Rome.

IT'S FOR ALL MARGINALIZED PEOPLE EVERYWHERE.

(2) Adding insult to injury, Jesus cites one Biblical example after another
to illustrate how the God whom they worship has become—in a word—TOO SMALL.

- Remember the foreign woman from Zarephath whom God chose to save?
- Remember that enemy general, Naaman, whom Elisha healed?

The song beneath his words goes something like this:
THE GOD I PROCLAIM WON'T BE HEMMED IN OR TRIMMED DOWN
TO FIT THE LIMITED SIZE OF YOUR IMAGINATION!

And that's when things start turning ugly.

Nods of approval turn into shouts of HOW DARE HE!

Jesus has pushed them, figuratively, over the edge; and now, this hometown crowd is ready to push him, literally, over the cliff.

There's a risk that comes with telling the truth.
And Jesus, in the weeks to come, will bear that risk all the way to Jerusalem and the cross.

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

Instead of saying, TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED
he could have said: ONE DAY 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, tax collectors, Gentiles, and the like—who might offend his "core constituency."

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!

Jesus could have done all these things 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—we would not be having this conversation.

Jesus embraced RISK, proclaimed in specific terms the kind of ministry he was called to embody.

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.

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Sisters and brothers, we are called to do likewise.

The world we live in is shifting. Economic, political, and media powers are being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

Social media behemoths deliver dopamine hits to keep us scrolling, while exerting less and less control over suspect websites, trolls, and content.

The whole creation cries out in crisis while new policies are bent on reversing course on hard won climate actions. The rule of law is under assault.

The world is shifting—and we must ask, for whose benefit?

One example: The work of USAID – United States Agency for International Development – was summarily halted by executive order last week.

It's through USAID that we, collectively, provide humanitarian and medical assistance, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance, advance economic opportunities in countries around the world.

The desperate FACEBOOK post by a friends of a friend Thursday began like this:

"The past two days have felt like a dystopian nightmare. I was laid off today as a USAID contractor due to the stop work order for all foreign assistance. My access to my email and systems was abruptly cut off. Yesterday was my last day of employment after serving at USAID for 11.5 years. No severance and I lose medical benefits in a few days.

Please let me know if your workplace is hiring. I can't be picky and need to get to higher ground. Please pray for our family and for all of the people around the world who were benefitting from USAID programs which have all been stopped."[1]

What's happening right now isn't the standard fluctuations of a stable transition of power but a purposefully chaotic and hostile overreach…

…a flood of long planned executive actions designed to confuse and overwhelm, to evoke fear and PTSD, and thereby blunt any collective response to the actions themselves.

THE QUESTION THE GOSPEL POSES FOR US TODAY IS:

Will we have the eyes to see and ears to hear…

will we have the voices to proclaim and lives to embody good news in the context in which we live in 2025?

What Jesus did that Sabbath morning in that synagogue is proclaim in very specific terms the kind of ministry he was called to be about.

As followers of Jesus, you and I are called to do the same.

So, what might that look like in our context?

[1] Read about the actions of Secretary of State Marco Rubio here: Rubio foreign aid freeze leads to USAID staff suspensions and contractor terminations - CBS News

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There are many possibilities, and we must choose—we can't do it all.

- Look at where people are being scapegoated, targeted, dehumanized, disenfranchised, and go there. Stand with them as witness and advocate.
- Look at what public benefit programs benefitting the poor are under threat. Raise your voice. Say it out loud in every venue you can—abandoning those least among us will NOT make America great again.
- Take notice where the rule of law is under siege; refuse to accept it as the new status quo. Say it out loud. Get involved.

Some of us have been or will be undergoing training in coming days so we can more effectively stand with immigrant, refugee, and asylum seekers whose lives and futures are now under threat.

Perhaps you are you being called to such a ministry. If so, I'm happy to share information with you.

Our Social Ministry Team will be meeting soon to begin devising a strategy for how we, collectively, can more effectively serve our neighbors during this tumultuous time. If you want to be part of that conversation, come join us.

In his preaching, teaching, and healing Jesus showed that his mission was authorized by God himself. He went all in.

It's time for the church to show its mettle. It's time for followers of Jesus to take risks and show up. This is the real deal. And how we do so matters. Amen.