

Acceptable words: Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 9, 2007

He was not the young man they had known before. They were sizing him up, as people in small towns will do, when he stood up in the synagogue to read from the prophet Isaiah. He read a fantastic and otherworldly passage, plainly not about Nazareth, but about some other place. And then he startled them all: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Was he talking about them? Or himself? And what did he mean by proclaiming right there, in his hometown, "the acceptable year of the Lord"?

A buzz of excitement went through the crowd, like the static electricity that precedes a storm, as someone stood up to ask just what he meant. Good will evaporated in the next moment, for he had turned this comforting scripture into a brief against his hometown.

He implied that "release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind" would threaten their status quo. They would not welcome a truth teller; no local hero could tell them what they needed to hear. That was why God's favor rested on outsiders, on the unwelcome. He practically dared them to run him out of town, which they did.

Who in Nazareth would have been threatened? We might imagine the usual suspects, the synagogue officials and the tax collectors, but in historical truth they weren't such villains, and if they had been, the townspeople wouldn't have leapt to defend them. No, Jesus leveled his message at the townspeople's spiritual pride—specifically at their pride in him. He would not countenance it, for he would not belong to them or be identified with their narrowness. His brothers and sisters would be "those who hear the word of God and do it."

There are things in ministry that you just don't do. You don't tell the head of the women's society what you really think of her. You don't laugh out loud at a fulsome eulogy. You don't say, "Glory, hallelujah!" when the organist threatens to play the hymns in double time. Too much candor can be unacceptable.

Being accepted is important to most preachers, and for good reason. If the people don't trust you or want to hear you, your ministry comes to an end. So you're tempted to smooth over the hard truths and sugarcoat the challenges.

But a preacher's calling is to say and do what is acceptable to God—because God, as Psalm 19 makes clear, does not keep silent.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God,” it begins. “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, their words to the end of the world.”

Far from being a void, the sky is the very word of God—a Torah of nature that can be read by anyone. It is as legible as the actual law described in verses 7-13. This Torah tells of a Creator who breaks forth in sun and rain, who enters the physical world. One can follow this word by following the course of the sun in the sky, like reading a scroll right to left. The word of the Lord calls for us to speak up. To read God's work in nature is to be literate— and this word is meant to be read aloud.

In one of the miracles of the lectionary, Psalm 19 really becomes Luke 4. It anticipates it and amplifies it, particularly in its magnificent close: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

I have spoken these words before my sermons, as if I really were about to say something dangerous and prophetic. When it comes to preaching about the war, however, I have done a lousy job. Only once in a while, and then in all-too-measured words crafted for minimal offense, I have tackled the major moral matters of the day. Like a lot of mainline preachers, I'm so mindful of the bottom line that I have hedged the prophetic voice. It has been easier, more acceptable, to preach Jesus rather than what Jesus preached.

The church I serve, like the synagogue in Nazareth, is proud of Jesus. It is more comfortable proclaiming him than his dangerous message.

And that message in Nazareth could just as well be preached today. It's not hard in this day and age to think what “release to the captives” might mean. It's not too hard to think what “sight to the blind” might mean. Or “to let the oppressed go free.” This radical message, first proclaimed by Isaiah in the Assyrian empire, then

by Jesus in the Roman empire, has a particular resonance for the American empire. Not just in the capital cities, but also in a small town in Galilee and a small town in Michigan.

A little while ago, the newspapers noted that the war in Iraq has lasted longer than U.S. involvement in World War II. That day at the coffee shop, men from the church were debating whether we should start withdrawing troops.

“Hey, you can’t tell the Iraqis when we’re getting out,” said one. “That’s suicide.”

“Seems like suicide to stay,” said another.

“What do you think, preacher?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Maybe this is the year.” Jesus would have said it more forcefully. *This is the acceptable year of the Lord.*

Maybe “the heavens are telling the glory of God” because they are above mere politics and can put truth and justice in something other than a partisan perspective. Or perhaps they have resolved not to wait. In any event, the heavens are doing their part; they ask us to join in the telling.