

The Gospel passage that was read today is connected to a larger section so before we get into the message, I’m going to provide the context of what lead up to this point. We are still early in Luke’s gospel account where in chapter 3, Jesus is baptized by his cousin John. At Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit of God descends upon Him like a dove, the heavens open and God says “You are my beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.”

Then Jesus, being *filled with the Spirit*, is led by the Spirit, into the wilderness where He is tested by the adversary – Satan – for 40 days. During these 40 days Jesus did not eat anything. After these 40 days, Jesus returned *in the power of the Spirit* to Galilee. He is teaching in the synagogues and word is spreading about Him. Jesus then comes to Nazareth, the town in which He was brought up and He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath and reads Isaiah 61:1 and the beginning of verse 2. This is the section right before this morning’s passage.

Jesus shared how through Him, people would find peace and rest and release from the many spiritual, psychological, and physical prisons that possess people. The people in the synagogue listening to Jesus were excited to hear this news in Nazareth.

The people marveled at the teaching Jesus shared. He chose an old favorite. He read the Isaiah text that the Israelites embraced as a promise for their liberation. This text struck deep at the longing and the heart of the people. It was a teaching the people held close to their hearts, for they lived for generations with a hunger for the answer to, “How long?” They woke up and went to sleep with the desire to know, “How long Lord must we suffer humiliation by our Roman oppressors, how long?”

Each day in the market place they searched for an answer to “How long must we pay the tax and give our crops to this heathen people, how long God?” Each Sabbath they gathered in the synagogue to hear a word from the Lord that would satisfy the burning puzzle of “How long must we wait for Your promise to be fulfilled God? How long before you send us our liberator, the Messiah to crush our enemies and reclaim the land for us -- your people -- how long Lord?”

So when Jesus chose this text, there was undoubtedly an expectation that the people brought to the moment of teaching. Many would have been expecting to lament over their plight and then be encouraged in their faithfulness and their birthright to hold on. At first, the people were elated. The text reads that, "All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips. (v. 22) Here, they even named His earthly father asking, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" There was a pride bubbling among those who heard Jesus.

However, Jesus did not stop with this tremendous claim. This claim was that in their hearing -- today -- the Scripture of the acceptable year when the Messiah would walk among them healing and releasing people from captivity was now. This is what Jesus preached. So the people were processing all of this and began to question how a son of a carpenter, the boy they watched grow in stature among them could be the promised One. That the Messiah would come from Nazareth was something they were not prepared to accept.

Jesus saw this playing out in their minds and in their body language and certainly in their facial expressions and murmuring. After all, He is God. This is when Jesus continued speaking, directing the next statements at their unbelief. In verse 23, Jesus said, surely you will challenge me to work signs and wonders to prove I am the Messiah. That was the heart of these people, who would follow the Messiah only if God showed up the specific way they expected. That is the spirit behind "Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum."

This spirit of unbelief that Jesus saw in them prompted Him to continue with "I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his hometown." (v. 24). Because the Isaiah 61 passage was a very popular one, I believe that some of the people listening to Jesus were wondering why Jesus only read part of verse 2. The last part of verse 2 reads: "And the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn..."

As Jesus begins to tell them that "today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," He is preparing them for some very hard lessons but they don't know this just yet. They are about to hear some things that are very offensive and disturbing to them, which puts Jesus in a dangerous situation. They are about to understand why Jesus didn't read the end of the verse 2. They go from listening to Him read the scripture and praising Him for the way in which He spoke and claiming Him as one of their own -- as they say amongst themselves, isn't this Joseph's son? -- to being filled

with murderous rage to where they seek to throw Jesus off of a cliff. In nine verses, the scene changes from respect and admiration to hatred and venomous fear.

It's amazing how human emotions can go from admiration to hatred in a few short minutes; How some people can go from paying compliments to a person, to using profanity, especially when they're communicating via email or social media; It's amazing how some people have such short fuses where they can "go off" on a person over the smallest things.

It's also very troubling to me how on this past Tuesday, January 29, early in the morning, actor Jussie Smollett was viciously attacked because of his race and sexual orientation -- just days before this country celebrates Black History Month.

For those who may not know this story, Jussie Smollett is an African American actor who plays a character on a TV series called "Empire." The character he plays on the show is also a gay male. He was near his home, in Chicago, and went to Subway (the sandwich shop) to get something to eat around midnight. On his way out, he was approached by two men dressed in black with their faces covered, they shouted racial and homophobic slurs at him, they physically assaulted him, they threw an unknown liquid on his face and body, and they threw a noose around his neck. We're not talking about the year 1919, this heinous attack happened this week; in 2019; in Chicago, the third largest city in the United States; this happened in Mr. Smollett's own neighborhood.

Aside from hatred and fear, what drives people to behave in such ways? What caused the Jewish people who were worshipping in the synagogue and recalling their familiarity with Jesus and his family to want to kill him just moments later? I'd like to suggest to you that they were not prepared to receive the lessons that Jesus was trying to teach them. It was a shock to them...something they couldn't reconcile.

They rejected what they heard because it did not fit with what they longed for; what they hoped for. They wanted salvation now and they wanted their enemies to pay...now. They wanted vengeance. They felt that they had a privileged position over the Gentiles and they were disturbed when Jesus reminded them that the ones who received salvation among them were Gentiles. Jesus points to this when He talks about the examples he shares about Elijah and Elisha.

These are Jesus' words:

²⁵ But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; ²⁶ but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, *in the region of Sidon*, to a woman *who was* a widow. ²⁷ And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

Jesus was telling them that in the same manner as Elijah and Elisha, He too would also go to "*heathens*," the wretched Gentiles, and feed the poor and cleanse the lepers among them. In other words, He would carry out miracles of mercy for the Gentiles, instead of fire, brimstone, and punishment upon them. He would do this for anyone who could receive these hard lessons and that was something that this group could not accept. Fortunately, Jesus knew their hearts and He miraculously passed through them as they attempted to kill Him. His hour had not yet come.

I want to leave you with two things to pray and think about this week related to this text: The first is the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We see in the context of this story that Jesus is filled *with the Spirit*. He is led in the wilderness by *the Spirit of God* and He returns to Galilee in the power of *the Spirit*.

Pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us and to lead us as we do the work of ministry. Pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us as we stand up for justice and equity. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give us courage when we speak truth in love to power. Pray for the Holy Spirit to protect us from people who seek to harm or destroy us. Also pray for those who are blinded by hatred and fear for God's love to remove the scales from their eyes and fill their hearts.

The second thing is to reconcile whatever God is trying to teach you that doesn't align with your current practices or beliefs. The people in this story who flipped in 9 verses are also you and me. We are not immune to this kind of behavior when we reject what Jesus is trying to teach us. Pray for God to help you accept things that God is trying to teach you. I don't know what hard lessons God is bringing into your life or things that you are wrestling with, but be open to be led by the Spirit of God and to be anchored in the never-ending love of God.

God has a unique perspective. Sometimes, we can only see things in new ways when we let go of what we initially think is “the way.” Having a teachable heart enables us to receive and integrate new lessons in our lives.

I know for me, a pivotal and hard lesson I had to wrestle with was during seminary. We were talking about grace and our professor said “be very careful when you draw circles of who’s in and who’s out of God’s will because you may have drawn yourself out of God’s grace.” Our professor wasn’t suggesting that God’s grace has some specific limit but he was cautioning us against having a legalistic and self-righteous perspective that condemns other people. The *only* One with the right to condemn *anyone* is Christ alone.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to empower and guide us;
Let us trust God enough to embrace the hard lessons God is teaching us;
that we ultimately are transformed by having accepted these lessons.

Amen!