

Series: Stretched by Jesus

“From Favor to Fury”

Introduction: Last week we traveled with Jesus and his parents to the Festival of Passover in Jerusalem. Though only twelve years old, Jesus amazed those who encountered him there with his maturity, when he stayed behind to discuss the scriptures with the teachers of the law. His parents, however, were astonished at the anxiety that he had stirred up in them by not telling them he would be staying behind. Further, they were puzzled when he then began to talk about another Father-figure that had begun to emerge in his life, one who was not Joseph. The uniqueness of Jesus, at a young age, had begun to stretch those close to him.

In this morning’s text we meet Jesus as a grown man, now fully aware of the fullness of his unique relationship with the Father, as well as the Father’s call on his life. The way Luke has arranged his gospel, what we’re about to hear could be considered the “inaugural address” of Jesus. It’s an address given at his home synagogue in Nazareth in which he outlines the character and the scope of the ministry that lay ahead of him. It certainly turned out to be a stretching address for those who were there. They began thinking favorably of what they were hearing from Jesus, but by the end of the hour, they were so furious that they tried to toss him off a cliff!

Have you ever been that furious? Have you ever been furious with Jesus? What was the reason? As you think about that, let’s wonder: What caused this audience in Nazareth to become so furious? What was so stretching about the gracious words they were hearing? To paraphrase an old hymn, what we’ll see is that the vision of grace that Jesus put forth was far deeper and wider than anything they had imagined or were comfortable with. It raises the question, how comfortable are we? [READ]

I. The Proclamation from the Pulpit

A. We pick up the action in Luke following the baptism of Jesus by John, and his subsequent 40 days of being tempted in the wilderness by Satan. Luke then moves Jesus into the synagogue where a significant part of his earthly ministry took place. For a 1st c. Jew, a synagogue was kind of like a congregational church for a 21st c. New Englander – there was one on the main street of every town. It was the place where weekly worship and instruction in the scriptures took place. A typical sabbath day service would have had remarkable similarity to our own, beginning with a call to worship and then several prayers. Two readings, one from the Pentateuch and the other from the Prophets would follow. Then, a teaching time would be offered, followed by a closing benediction.

B. Since a synagogue had no professional clergy, any distinguished person could be invited to read and comment on the text. This became the practice of Jesus as he traveled from town to town. Certainly, the ministry of healing that he had been performing would have sparked people’s interest and given him a ready hearing. The text for the day as Jesus came to worship in Nazareth was from Isaiah 61. Let’s hear it again, imagining, if we can, Jesus reading it:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

This was a text that a devout Jew would have linked to the coming of the Messiah and the Messiah-led deliverance by God of his people. It was a vision of God's new and transformative work of healing, spiritually, physically, and materially. Most significantly, it included expectations that the Jews would be liberated from their pagan enemies—the Romans—whose soldiers roamed the streets and whose exorbitant taxes they were forced to pay. If you couldn't pay, your land would be taken. For the 90% of the Jewish population that lived near or below subsistence level, this was a real and present danger.

C. We don't know what all Jesus said about this text when he sat down and began to speak, but his opening statement was amazing: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Not that this vision had been, or would quickly be, completed, but that the new thing God was up to was now beginning in and through Jesus. The kingdom of God, as Jesus said in another place, was at hand.

II. The Reaction in the Pews

A. The initial reaction of the people in the pews was positive, it seems. They were amazed at his gracious words. But "amazed" can also take on a negative connotation, too, something along the lines of, "How can he say such things?" Perhaps the reaction began positive but then moved to the negative as they realized that the one saying all of these dramatic things, the one claiming to be the Messiah, was Joseph's son, the kid who had grown up down the street, the kid who had run away from his parents in Jerusalem, the kid who they had seen playing on the streets every day . . . how can *he* be saying these things? How can he be making these claims? It was a similar reaction for those who would later hear Jesus say, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." The response of those listening was: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" [Jn. 6:41-42] These were turning out to be incredibly stretching statements Jesus had begun to make!

B. Well, from the perspective of his audience, things got even more uncomfortable. Knowing they wanted him to perform some kind of dramatic sign, like they had heard he had done elsewhere, Jesus instead went on to speak of two great acts of healing that had been a part of their history in the days of the great prophets. One was the healing from hunger through the provision of food for a widow living in the midst of an extended famine in Sidon, and the other was the healing of leprosy for a man named Naaman who lived in Syria. Unsettling was the fact that there were plenty experiencing both food insecurity, as well as leprosy in Israel, but these two that God had chosen to heal were Gentiles, living outside the borders of Israel. And not only that, Naaman was the commander of an enemy army! How deep and wide was the grace of God, anyway?

C. To add to the shock of all this was what Jesus didn't say. When he read from Isaiah 61, he stopped just short of v. 2b, which declares: "and the day of vengeance of our God." This verse speaks to a day of reckoning, a time when the judgment of God would be visited upon the ungodly. But, the fact that Jesus stopped just short of reading it suggests that it was not time for that judgment yet. Now, "today," with the arrival of Jesus (and running all the way up to when he would return), it was the time of grace, the time of God's favor, the time of extending mercy to all, both friend and foe alike.

D. That his hearers had a hard time swallowing this is found in the clue that they didn't seek to invite him for coffee and donuts after worship! Instead, they drove him out of town to a nearby cliff in order to throw him off!! This young preacher, it seemed to the hearts and minds of those who had heard him, was working the wrong side of the street. He was talking about rescuing the wrong people.

He was unpatriotic, a wimp, even, unwilling to take on the power of Rome. In fact, he probably wanted to rescue them, too! Now, it's not that these listeners didn't know that God's plan, launched way back through Abraham, included bringing blessing to the Gentiles. But, while we love to sing the song "Amazing Grace," it's one thing to sing it with yourself in mind; it's another thing altogether to sing it with the "other" in mind, especially when that other is so different than you and makes you feel so uncomfortable. How much do we have to stretch, Jesus?

Your conversation with God might run something like this:

Lord –

You mean to tell me that this Jesus, born of Mary, is also the son of David, the Messiah, your Son?

You mean to tell me that the means by which the human race will be rescued from its brokenness and sin is not by our own effort but by the death and resurrection of this Jesus?

You mean to tell me that this rescue extends to all who respond to him in repentance and faith, whether rich or poor, white or black, male or female, straight or gay, republican or democrat, those who live in Texas or those who live in Tehran . . . ?

You mean to tell me I need to love them, too, just like you do?

Well, I'm telling you, all of that makes me highly uncomfortable!

To which he might say, well, yes, but this is the nature of the grace you have received. If you are struggling with it, I invite you to enter more deeply into my heart, to know the love that surpasses knowledge, and to be filled to overflowing so that my love might flow through you to others.

No mob, you need to know, will be able to thwart my purposes!

As our young poet laureate (Amanda Gorman) put it so well at the presidential inauguration last week,

"The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light
if only we're brave enough to see it,
if only we're brave enough to be it."

Or, as Jesus put it to the church: "You are the light of the world..." (Ma. 5:14). May God free us and empower us to be such.