

4th Sunday after Epiphany C 30 January 2022

Luke 4:21-30

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace, peace, and love to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

And [Jesus] said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Let's pray...

I hope to capture and keep your attention this morning by posing a somewhat unorthodox question. How wild and untamed is your Jesus? Do you think of Jesus as the one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, the one anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour? Or is he just the lad who lives down the road; Joseph's boy; the neighbourhood kid you've watched growing up, and heard about for years?

"How wild and untamed is your Jesus?" is both the question and the source of conflict in today's gospel. And it's no different for us today. Think about how we raise our children. Isn't it true that we warn our children to stay away from wild, uncontrollable, and unpredictable people; that they're bad news? Think about how often we say to our children, "Settle down, be still, you're making too much noise." And we're quick to label radicals, rebels, those who upset the status quo, challenge the way things have always been, ask hard questions, and speak new truths... as trouble makers. I'll give you an example to mull over:

Dom Helder Pessoa Camara was a revolutionary priest who served as Catholic archbishop of Olinda and Recife from 1964 to 1985 during the military dictatorship in Brazil. He purportedly wrote in his prison journal, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist" [John Dear, *Peace Behind Bars: A Peacemaking Priest's Journal from Jail* (1995)]. Shane Claiborne, the radical American street

pastor, leading figure in the New Monasticism movement, and founding member of the non-profit organisation, The Simple Way, makes this pointed observation of Archbishop Camara's quip, "Charity wins awards and applause but joining the poor gets you killed. People do not get crucified for living out of love that disrupts the social order that calls forth a new world. People are not crucified for helping poor people. People are crucified for joining them" [Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (2006)].

Humans, driven by sin and pride, can be terribly fickle, stubborn, selfish, and destructive. We want others to act in accordance with what we believe is acceptable and appropriate. We prefer that people stay within boundaries that make us feel safe. We try to domesticate, tame, limit the wild ones, even Jesus. Like Pharaoh, we refuse to yield and change. We persist with paddling against the tide even though Isaiah tells us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts; nor are our ways his ways [55:8]. So, no-one should be surprised that today's gospel ends with the religious people enraged and seeking to kill Jesus, the ultimate way to domesticate him.

Jesus has just returned to Galilee following his wilderness experience with the devil. Picture a wild man filled with the power of the Spirit wandering into the synagogue fresh from the wilderness, to teach. He has a message for his listeners, but also a mission. He speaks about good news to the poor, the oppressed, the captive, and the blind. He describes a new world of freedom and release, the year of the Lord's favour. He focuses on the least, the lost, the last, and the forgotten. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus says. And this is where things get slippery.

There's a hint of unfinished business in Jesus' declaration, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The unspoken challenge to his hearers is, "So, what are you going to do about it?" Jesus is a man of both word and action. He demands obedience to what is heard. The listening we love, but the doing – not so much. We warm to the feel-good factor of his message but when we realise it challenges us to follow his way, we balk. Safer for us to domesticate Jesus and sanitise his message: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'" It's the oldest trick in the book.

The easiest way to ignore a message is to focus on the messenger. Sometimes we do this with amazement at how gracious their words are and at other times with rage when they don't think, speak, or act in ways that we're comfortable with. That's exactly what the people of Nazareth do. They begin to re-cast Jesus in ways that are less threatening, maintain the status quo, and allow them to avoid looking at the reality of their life and who God really is. After all, isn't that what happens when we return to our own hometowns. We tend to be viewed as we were, not as we are, as though time stands still. Jesus for them is not the anointed one, the one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests. He is simply Joseph's boy.

Like the Nazarenes, we don't like change. We like business as usual – our comfortable and familiar ways. If we can just make Jesus the hometown boy then surely, we, his own people, his own family and friends, will be the first to benefit. Do for us, Jesus, the things we heard you did at Capernaum – release us from our demons, heal our sick.

Ever the wild man, Jesus refuses to be domesticated. He performs no miracles. Instead, he tells them stories about how God can't and won't be tamed, enclosed, or limited; stories about how God's grace was poured out on foreigners and pagans - the widow at Zarephath in Sidon, and Naaman the Syrian.

“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” This is their final attempt to domesticate Jesus “but he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

He didn't go on his way because he was rejected. He was rejected because he wouldn't be tamed, because he wouldn't play the role of the hometown kid. If we're honest that's the Jesus we prefer. We want a God we can control, do what we want, when we want, and for whom we want. We want God to favour us as opposed to “them.” We want to tame God; frame him in our image.

But God is a wilderness God and won't be domesticated. In Jesus, God is always crossing boundaries, loving people we deem unlovable, making the first last and the last first, raising up the least, going back for those left behind, finding the lost and forgotten ones, and forgiving relentlessly. His message is sometimes difficult to hear and accept. It comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. If we can't accept that, we'll be left filled with rage, seeking to hurl Jesus and his message off the cliff.

If, however, we are as I suspect, those upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests; those whose boundaries are expansive; those whose hearts beat for the downtrodden, the oppressed, the blind, the poor; those who respond to need with the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing; those who like things a little unpredictable and spontaneous – a little spicy; indeed, those in whose hearing this scripture has been fulfilled; Yes!, we who have responded to our baptismal calling and believe; we will follow and be obedient to the untameable One.

Indeed, how can we not drop everything, follow Jesus, and be amazed at all he has said and done, the most gracious and loving of which is his promise of salvation that we may lead a full and God-pleasing life. Now, let's revisit how we might answer that question: How wild and untamed is your Jesus? My answer is, "Wild enough to save a wretched sinner like me." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.