

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Lynchin’ Jesus”
Luke 4:16-30
A Sermon for MLK Weekend,
Inspired by James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*
January 22, 2017

Tough crowd, huh? You’ve got to feel a bit sorry for Jesus.

I mean, here he is, fresh out of seminary, he’s back home for his first sermon and they are at his neck. I heard one seminary professor say that Jesus’ first sermon with the hometown crowd here in Luke 4 went over about as well as a fart in church.

Apparently the folks there thought it stunk.

And they’re ready to lynch him for it. Did you catch that? They were going to hurl him off a cliff.

I don’t know, but it seems like a bit of an overreaction. I mean, I’ve preached some bad sermons in my day. Some here, but some were before I came, when I was fresh out of seminary.

But no one’s ever tried to hurl me off a cliff afterwards. You just don’t do that kind of thing... especially to the hometown kid.

Come on, Nazareth. What’s wrong with you guys?

You almost get the sense that the folks of Nazareth are a little unstable. They love him one minute and hate him the next. He starts off reading one of everyone’s favorite passages from Isaiah, that passage about the Year of Jubilee... where God is going to restore everything and everyone.

The Year of Jubilee was set to happen every 50 years, and on that year, all debts were to be forgiven.

Slaves were to be released.

If you had acquired someone else’s land over the last few generations, you had to give it back.

It was this great equalizing moment. Everyone got a clean slate. No one was behind anymore and no one was ahead.

I imagine that was a pretty popular idea back in Jesus’ day... being that they were all under foreign occupation and all. The “land” was controlled by Rome. No one could get ahead; accept the corrupt few that worked with the Romans.

So, Jubilee... well it sounded pretty great.

And they had heard rumors that Jesus was already doing some pretty amazing things over in the next town over. So, they were excited to have him home and talking about Jubilee.

In fact, at first everyone was pretty amazed.

“Can you believe that’s Joseph’s boy?” they said.

“I remember changing his diapers in the church nursery.”

“Well, I taught his Sunday school class... He wouldn’t be where he is today without that foundation you know?”

They were beaming with pride.

And they were so excited about what seemed to be happening. And who wouldn’t be? Jesus is a regular hometown hero.

He’s David Freese after Game 6 of the 2011 World Series.

Everybody’s talking about him.

Everybody loves him.

Until... he gets to the second half of his sermon, that is.

It’s hard to believe that the crowd could swing so hard and so fast...

After all, Jesus just tells a few stories about those great Old Testament heroes: Elijah and Elisha. It’s not like those guys were controversial. Elijah and Elisha were popular figures. So why the sudden burst of rage?

I mean what’s in the water there in Nazareth?

A few familiar stories, and you’re ready to lynch the guy?

You’ve got to wonder, what in the world could trigger that kind of reaction, don’t you? How does a nice, church going group of people, suddenly turn on their own neighbors with that kind of anger and violence? What would cause them to do that?

The only thing I can imagine... is that something Jesus said was very threatening to them.

something deep within them...

something... that they cherished....

something about who they are and what they believe to be true...

something about their way of life suddenly *felt very threatened*.

It’s easy for us to miss. It’s easy for us, separated by 2000 years and half a globe, to not quite catch just how unsettling Jesus’ words were...

It's not that Elijah was a controversial figure.

He was a hero.

He was one of the greatest prophets of Israel.

He was everyone's favorite.

He's a prophet worth naming your firstborn son after!

But of all the stories about Elijah that Jesus could tell, he focuses on the story of the widow in Sidon. You might remember that story from this last October when we heard it in worship. It's the story of a great drought in all the land... where lots of people were suffering... lots of people needed a taste of God's salvation... especially there in Israel

And Jesus says..., ever so pointedly,.... Elijah wasn't called to a widow in Israel.. He was called to the foreigner, in a foreign land.

Apparently, God didn't think Israel should always be first.

God didn't think their country should always be first.

In other words, the Year of Jubilee, God's great salvation, may just be for someone other than you.

Well, that sure gets their defenses up.

"What exactly does he mean by that?" they are wondering.

"I mean, who does Jesus think he is anyway? That boy needs to respect his elders..." they are thinking.

"Remember where you came from!"

You see, that's the funny thing about the way we react to the good news. When God's salvation is for us... and "us first" we're so deeply grateful and overwhelmed and worship the giver of life.

But when God's salvation is for someone else... well... maybe that's OK as long as it doesn't cost us something. As long as it doesn't contradict our values... As long as it doesn't contradict what we already "hold to be self evident."

But you know the Year of Jubilee, did cost something... to everyone who was doing pretty well in life... to everyone who liked the status quo.

The Year of Jubilee is great... as long as you're the one whose debts are being forgiven. But not so much, if you're the one losing your place as #1.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first in the economy of God. That's how it is with this radical gospel of Jesus. When we receive God's grace and forgiveness, it is good news. But ***the gospel of Jesus isn't just for "us and ours."***

It's for the world... Christian and Muslim alike, black and white, gay and straight, citizen and immigrant, rich and poor... it is for all of God's children.

And sometimes that comes to us as the best news we've ever heard, ***but other times it threatens our very way of life.***

Just to make sure they get this, Jesus tells one more story. This time about Elisha. And again, of all the great stories of Elisha he could tell... he focuses on the story of Naaman.

Now you need to know that Naaman was no poor man. He wasn't like the widow in Sidon.

Naaman was a general.

Naaman was a man of power.

But the thing is, he wasn't a general in Israel's army. He was a general in their enemy's army.

Well, you'd think your enemy's general getting leprosy is a good thing, right? I mean, you might take it as a sign of God cursing them and God working on your behalf.

But not Elisha. Nope. Instead, he guided Naaman to healing... Naaman was the one God decided to heal first...

And maybe that would be good and fine if Naaman had decided to become one of them... to be on Israel's side.

But oh no. That wasn't part of the deal. He went back home and went about his work.

It might also be OK if all the lepers in Israel had also been cured. But it didn't work that way. None of the lepers in Israel were cured that day. None of "their countrymen" were cured that day.

I don't know why.

Can't explain it. ***But Jesus makes sure to make that point.***

In fact, it's very pointed. Jesus is saying, ***God's salvation is not about you.*** It is always about God.

Which is to say, it's not about propping up your way of life and your social values and your ideas of who should be first. It's not about your security and safety.

It's not a very PC way for Jesus to tell that story, you know... ***not very patriotic, Jesus.*** The crowd that day wouldn't have it... "How could he talk like that about those foreigners?"

Apparently... allowing your heart to be open and ***ruled by*** patriotism is exactly what creates prejudice... in our world
And so, by the end of this sermon, they were ready to lynch Jesus.

You see, the surprising reaction of the crowd in Nazareth that day... really isn't all that surprising... not when you look at history.

It's the very same impulse of good God-fearing church-attending Germans in the 1930's that were just fine with getting rid of the "others," the "outsiders," those they had decided were the problems with their struggling economy...the Jewish people that were defiling them.

It's the same impulse that drove so many good church going people to put on white robes and white pointy hats and burn crosses in people's yards... not all that long ago here.

It's the same impulse that split churches in half when they first began integrating.

It's the same impulse that sparked profound violence against fellow neighbors in the Civil Rights Movement...

The impulse of the Nazarenes' church crowd that day... is no different than the impulse of the Alabama church crowd and the Selma church crowd... that unleashed dogs and water cannons and toxic gases, and violent brutality on African American women and men.

Seemingly decent human beings...
deacons and Sunday school teachers...
upstanding community leaders...
pastors like me... church goers like you...
None of us are immune, you know.

When something deep within us feels threatened... even by Jesus
when something that we believe to be true...
something about our way of life suddenly *feels very threatened....* well,
there's a good chance we'll be more inclined to lynch the gospel, rather than live the gospel.

When they heard Jesus's stories, "they were filled with rage," scripture says. A mob began to form... and drove him out of town, to the edge of a cliff, to throw him off.

I want to do something very unusual this morning. In honor of MLK weekend last weekend, I'm going to invite you to watch this clip... it's a series of images from the Civil Rights Movement. Maybe some of you have seen these clips before.

But as you watch it today, I want to invite you to watch it with this story of Jesus in mind. After all, Jesus tells us that we will find him in the least of these. So as you watch... see if you can recognize Jesus... the one "they got up and drove out of town."

Show Video: "Violent Racism During Peaceful Protest in Civil Rights Movement"

[Rd. vs. 17-21, 28-30]

And it wasn't the last time was it?

Jesus is the one who knows what it is to be attacked by an angry mob of people who feel threatened by his presence.

Jesus is the one who knows what it is like to be strung up in a tree and left to die.

Jesus is the one who knows just how costly the good news of our God can be at times... precisely because it is good news for all people. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do..." he said, hanging on that wooden cross.

And he invites us to join him in the work of this Jubilee news,
this work of making all things new,
the work of healing the world, even those that are hard to love,
this work of making the crooked places straight and the rough places smooth

But that work, has to begin in our own hearts... in our own souls. Whatever is enslaved in our own souls needs to be set free.
what is blind in us, needs to begin to see.

So, this morning, as we prepare to come to this table, I want to invite you to pray with me this ancient prayer attributed to St. Francis. Let's pray.

Prayer of St. Francis

**Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.**

**O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;**

**to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.**