

“Comfort and Peace”
Ephesians 2:11-22
07.11.21

Introduction

There’s this story in the Gospels where Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee. He travels around to various villages preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, healing the sick, performing miracles, and casting out demons. Then, after he takes his sweet time, he eventually makes his way to his hometown in Nazareth.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath Day, takes the scroll and reads from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and he has anointed me...” Now, we need to stop here because this passage is highly symbolic.

The Hebrew word for “anointed” is where we get the word “Messiah.” Therefore, by reading this passage of Scripture, Jesus is letting the people in Nazareth know what is going to characterize his messianic vocation. He reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹

Jesus rolls up the scroll, sits down, and says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”² This is what we call a “mic-drop moment.” Jesus is implicitly saying, “I am the Messiah and here is what I am going to do.”

At first the people in Nazareth are “amazed” at Jesus’ “gracious words.” I can just imagine the kind of conversations that were taking place. One older lady says, “I remember when Jesus was just a baby. I helped Mary change his diapers!” And a gentleman on the other side says, “I went to pick up a piece of furniture at Joseph’s shop when Jesus was just a boy. I should have known then that he was destined for greatness.”

As the conversation continues to play out, Jesus interrupts everyone and says, “A prophet does not receive honor in his own hometown.” It is almost like Jesus is bracing them for bad news.

Then Jesus tells the people in the congregation how this whole plan is going to materialize. And every example he gives from the prophets found in the Old Testament is about how they stepped outside of Israel to serve Gentiles.³ In other words, Jesus is telling the people in his hometown that the benefits of the kingdom will not be directed toward them.

¹ Luke 4:18-19, NRSV

² Luke 4:20, NRSV

³ F. Bovon, *Luke 1*, p. 156

Once the people in Nazareth understand what Jesus is saying, they get up, drive him out of town, and lead him to the brow of the hill so that they might cast him off the cliff. Thankfully, Jesus is able to pass through the crowd and escape.

When we have a bad day, or a stressful week, we should remind ourselves that the people of Jesus' hometown literally tried to throw him over a cliff because of the change he was trying to bring. Jesus' version of peace was so different from the people of Nazareth that they were ready to kill him.

Digging Deeper

Last week we looked at all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus to put us in a right relationship with God. This week, in Ephesians chapter two, Paul shifts gears and reminds us that being a Christian is not about being on some individual spiritual path; instead, being a Christian is joining the movement that Jesus started to restructure reality as we know it.

Paul acknowledges that there was a wall of hostility that used to separate Jews and Gentiles, and he claims that Jesus came to tear down that wall so that we could all become one new person in Christ. Paul says that Jesus came to proclaim peace to those who were "far off" (i.e., Gentiles) as well as those who were "near" (i.e., Jews). But based on the story from Luke's Gospel, it makes me wonder how that message was received by these two different groups. Perhaps what sounded like peace to some sounded more like a threat to the power and privilege of the others.

Reflection

When Paul talks about Christ breaking down the wall that divides two different ethnic groups, I can't help but think of the Berlin Wall, which separated the city both geographically and ideologically for nearly three decades. It is estimated that over 100,000 people tried to escape during that time period, and over 5,000 were successful.

In 1989 a revolution broke out and the iron curtain fell. For countless people, it was the beginning of peace in Germany. For others it was the end of peace in Germany. It felt like complete and total chaos. It all depends on whether the wall represented comfort or whether its destruction represented freedom.

I think there's a message in here for us today. Aside from Paul's clear concern for racial reconciliation, it is easy for any group to become inwardly focused like the people of Nazareth in Jesus' day. It is easy for us to build walls and separate ourselves into categories of "us" and "them."

I want to address a wall that exists for us today. It is the wall that separates us those of us who are here and those of us who are not here yet. In more technical terms we might say that the divide exists between "church members," and those who are "unchurched."

For the last few decades church attendance in America has been in significant decline, especially in mainline denominations. Church leadership experts have been waving their arms and saying, “something has to change.”

In response, some churches have done nothing at all, while others have made changes on the surface like getting a new sign or starting a new program. And while all efforts to produce fruitful ministry should be commended, I’m convinced that what most churches have needed is a paradigm shift in mission.

Is the mission of the church to protect our comfort, or is the mission of the church to tear down walls that separate us so that we can welcome those who are not here yet? When we start to take these questions seriously we realize that if our mission is our comfort, it doesn’t really matter what we try to do to stay alive because it is ultimately like trying to re-arrange furniture on the Titanic.

Through research and seminars, I have learned that when most churches say they want to grow, what they really mean is that they want to assimilate new people into the current system exactly the way it is in order to keep the institution alive. In that case, the mission is really about preserving the comfort of those of us who are already here.

However, there are people in our community who are hurting and need God’s love. It’s unlikely that we are going to reach them by creating some innovative new program. That’s just not how our world works anymore. But we might just reach them if we are willing to tear down the walls that separate us so that they know that their peace is more important than our comfort.

Tearing down that wall will mean changing the entire infrastructure of who we are...and it will inevitably feel like chaos for those of us who are used to that wall separating our wants from the needs of our community. If we are driven by our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, then there will be nothing too big or too small that we will be willing to change in order to welcome those who are not here yet.

As your pastor, I would love to help lead St. Andrew through this process, but I won’t try to force it on you. It will only work if we can come together in one mind and unite together in mission.

As the body of Christ, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us and has anointed us to proclaim good news to those who are not here yet. So, what are we going to do about it?

Reference Tools

Bovon, Francois. *Luke 1*. 2002. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Before you begin, say a prayer and read this week's Scripture passage.
2. Have you ever done a renovation project that involved tearing down a wall? If so, what kind of mess did it make? What were some of the challenges?
3. What impressions does the story about Jesus returning to Nazareth leave with you? What do you think are the implications for us today?
4. What walls does Jesus want to tear down in your life? How does he want you to turn away from focusing on your own comfort in order to bring others peace?
5. What will it look like for our church to focus more on the inclusion of others rather than own comfort and preferences?
6. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?
7. How can we pray for you?