

“The Year of the Lord’s Favor”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 31, 2010

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 49:8-13

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 4:18-30

Each year, I find it becomes harder to watch the State of the Union address; not because of the speech itself, but because the reaction of the esteemed audience seems so contrived. Both Democrats and Republicans are constantly looking across the aisle to see if members of the other party are going to stand and applaud. And this year, when one of the Supreme Court justices even blinked an eye, it was big news.

After last week’s speech, one of the commentators remarked that President Obama devoted less than ten minutes of his seventy minute speech to foreign policy. Two wars and a half-million American troops and contractors overseas, the continued threat of terrorism and potential nuclear threats in countries like Iran and North Korea; all summed up in nine minutes – and that’s counting the breaks for applause. Nobody was surprised, of course, given the state of the economy; it was remarkable because it was out of the ordinary.

But, a State of the Union address ought to be a unique declaration. It is a chance to place the nation in the present by pointing its citizens toward the future. According to this criteria, I believe – IMO (in my opinion) – that our President missed an opportunity to reaffirm our interconnectedness with the rest of the world. As many problems as we might have locally and nationally, they still pale in comparison with most of the world. If there is a car in your garage, you are wealthier than four-fifths of the world’s population. If you had breakfast this morning, you are ahead of two billion people in the world.

And yet, to paraphrase a notable politician; one with whom our President is quite familiar: “foreign policy doesn’t play in Peoria.” Polls show that the number one issue for Americans is the economy, followed by health care, with foreign affairs down the list. And so, an elected official would be foolish – and probably not elected for long – to stray far from hometown concerns.

Jesus returns to his hometown and proclaims good news to the poor, sight for the blind, release for the captives, and the year of the Lord’s favor. He tells the people of Nazareth that they are witnessing the fulfillment of that which God had promised to them long ago. But, “When Jesus proclaims the words of the prophet Isaiah to his hometown congregation, his listeners believed that they had him figured

out; they also thought they had God figured out. They believed that they knew all about God, and about the scope and limits of God's love."¹

The Jews of Jesus' day did not live in a perfect world – they were, in many ways, an oppressed people themselves – but they did not realize that they were also oppressors. They viewed themselves as better than the other people around them, more pure, closer to the heart of God. When they heard the ancient words about the year of the Lord's favor, they thought it meant this was their year, but theirs alone.

The Jews of Nazareth “did not want to hear that Jesus' message was not for the Jews alone, but for all peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike. The Jews in the synagogue wanted an exclusive God, one who made a covenant with them alone; Jesus announced an inclusive God, a God whose people covered the entire earth.”² The good news that God announces through Jesus is jarring to the synagogue regulars; that God's grace has been and will be revealed to and through non-Jews. God is larger than any religion and wider than our religious imagination.

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus is led to say, “no prophet is accepted in that prophet's hometown.” Literally, Jesus tells them that no prophet is accepted in his own *patris*; his native place. This could refer either to his hometown or his home country – the land of his father. It may be that the gospel writer is foreshadowing Jesus' rejection not just by his old neighbors in Nazareth, but ultimately by his whole people in Jerusalem. Jesus could see in the eyes and hear in the voices of those at the synagogue that they expected him to do something amazing, for them. After performing miracles in Capernaum and the other cities around Galilee, wouldn't he do even more in Nazareth?

Why the mood of the people of Nazareth turns around so completely we do not exactly know. What we do know is how angry they became; angry enough to try to hurl Jesus over the edge of a cliff. Here, we find not a foreshadowing, but a reminder. This episode takes us back to the wilderness where the tempter asks Jesus to jump off a cliff because God will surely be there to catch him. The people of Nazareth have been deceived into thinking that there was not enough of God to go around; and that no news (and no Jesus) would have been better than what they considered bad news.

Still, as a Caucasian male in the United States, I have never spent a day knowing the oppression that the Jews of the ancient world knew. Not a day, but maybe a moment. Here is what happened: when I was a freshman in high school, our varsity basketball team was playing in the district tournament against a team from the other side of town, ironically named Valley High. The game was held at a neutral court, with our fans on one side of the gym and their fans on the other. Our team lost, badly. After the game, I was walking with two friends in the parking lot and I heard

¹ Bruce Epperly, “Living by the Word” in *Christian Century*, Jan. 26, 2010

² Frederick Parrella in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Jan. 2007

someone call out: “hey, J. Wahl” which was what a lot of people called me back then. It also happened to be what was written on my school letter jacket; it turns out that the person who called out my name didn’t know me at all.

The next thing I knew, I was on the ground; hands and feet were busy pummeling my face. To call it a fight would insinuate that I put up some kind of defense. Instead, I was just down. My eyes were swollen shut almost instantly. Over the next week or so, I used a lot of icepacks and drank a lot of milkshakes. But as for that night, it’s a blank.

But, here’s what I’ve been told happened. One friend ran back into the gym to find the coach, who immediately ran to the Valley fan bus, with the players right behind him. In the back seat, three guys were sitting there in their Valley jackets with blood dripping from their shoes. They were dragged off the bus and, if the police hadn’t arrived, more punches surely would have been thrown.

Exclusion or oppression can sometimes be an individual experience, but it often then leads to collective violence. The people in Nazareth take offense not so much with what Jesus is claiming about himself, as with the claims that he makes about God. The God that Jesus reveals to them is more than their own tribal deity. They believed that a God who was on their side had to be on their side only. The “good news” that Jesus had announced to them may not have affected them as individuals, but it did as a people. As individuals, they were amazed at Jesus’ gracious words, saying – as individuals – “isn’t this Joseph’s son?” But, as a people, they were filled with rage and drove him out of town to the edge of a cliff.

Those in Nazareth who rejected Jesus could see how dangerous Jesus was; he threatened their entire system in which all of Jewish wisdom and, ultimately, the whole of God’s authority, were called into question. Jesus seems dangerous to them because they have not developed maturity in their faith. Feeling that you have to fight is a sign of collective immaturity. After being beaten to a pulp, I didn’t feel at all like fighting back, but because some guys from another school had beaten up someone from their own school, my friends wanted to fight back. Like children in a schoolyard, the people of Jerusalem thought that if they taught the troublemaker a lesson, the trouble (which is what they perceived Jesus’ message to be) would go away.

Immature faith, childish faith, means wanting to have a god who always does just what we want, so that we’ll always be the winners.³ The people of Jesus’ hometown so identify religion with their own wants and desires that God’s favor for anyone they do not favor is inconceivable. Thus, we have Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats at war with each other; Catholic and Protestant Irish who fight for

³ Scott Cowdell in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Jan. 2007

generations, Muslims and Jews and Christians all opposing some combination of the other for centuries.

In our multi-ethnic and multi-faith world, today's Gospel reminds us that these others are very close to home – the enemy isn't just over there, like the foreigners that Jesus names in today's Gospel; rather, the enemy might just as easily be safely hidden away in our own hearts. We can also be the ones who drive messengers of inclusion to the edge of the cliff. We often choose comfort over challenge in our religion, we prefer reassurance to soul searching, we prefer promises of healing rather than hearing the call to confession.

Jesus enters the synagogue and announces the year of the Lord's favor. When we hear this read, we wonder how it could possibly be so: not with a humanitarian disaster in Haiti and a continuing economic collapse close to home. Can it be so amid the personal challenges that we may each be facing at this moment, in this new year?

But, a maturing faith tells us that God's good news may indeed be just that: it is not just comfort to us in the manner we are used to. It's a message of love and favor for all people, the entire human family, even those we don't know or like or approve of. It is a message of hope for the marginalized and disadvantaged of this world which can carry us beyond our fears and grudges and biases. Instead, this good news can carry us to build a better world.

In this Christ-proclaimed year of the Lord's favor, will we, God's people, drive the messenger of God's grace and love to the edge of the cliff; or will we find ways to pull others in the human family away from the edge? May we – as we have been challenged to do – grow in faith both deep and wide. AMEN.