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***4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – Year C***

***Sunday, January 30, 2022***

Grace and Peace to you, I bring you greetings this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany from Bishop Kevin Strickland and the whole Southeastern Synod Staff and siblings across, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

Today's gospel from Luke, chapter 4 needs to be heard and can really only be understood in the context of last week's gospel. Last week we heard Luke 4:14-21 and today we pick up with the last verse, verse 21 and move to verse 30. So where are we in this story?

Jesus has been baptized, he's been tempted in the wilderness and now has returned home to Nazareth and gone to his family's synagogue for worship and there he reads from the prophet Isaiah: *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.*” And then Jesus shares the verse that starts our reading for today to the people of Nazareth, *“Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

That text from last week lays out our Epiphany revelation for who Jesus is and what he is going to do. It's what his priorities are, what the direction of his ministry will be – good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, declaring God's favor; right now, here, today.

That was last week's text. Jesus is pretty clear as to what his call is to be and the final verse is that declaration and it's where we begin today. *“Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

All of what was shared last week sounds like exactly what we would hope Jesus has come to earth to do, I'm sure that for those attending the synagogue that day they would agree. There is hope in that text from Isaiah and yet as we read the next verses, something goes horribly wrong and our text today ends not with Jesus being heralded as the hero but rather by the end of our text, they are ready to throw him off a cliff. What went wrong?

Have you ever had a moment when you thought you and someone else were both on the same page, only to find out that really you and that other person are on opposite ends of the understanding or each has their own agenda and those agendas don't add up?

I wonder if that's the question at the heart of today's gospel. I wonder if the colliding agendas is the conflict between Jesus and his own people. I wonder if our own agendas sometimes collide with God's agenda.

Jesus came to Nazareth, his hometown, went to worship, picked up the scroll assigned for the day from Isaiah and read it, except this time Jesus' reading would be different. This time Jesus says to them that that scripture they just heard was fulfilled. It was happening right in front of them, in their hearing.

It sounded great. I mean who wouldn't want the poor to have good news? Who wouldn't want the release of those who are captive, sight for the blind, freedom for those oppressed and that this would be the year of God's favor? The people love it. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." They recognize Jesus as one of their own. They know him. "Is not this Joseph's son? They know him. He knows them. They remember him when he was just a boy. Hidden within their question, however, is an unspoken expectation, an agenda. "If that's what he's going to do for them, just think how much more he'll do for us."

We all know the old adage that it takes a village to raise a child and here Jesus is their hometown boy and after all, shouldn't there be a little quid pro quo. They gave him his start. They helped make him what he is today. They expect to not just be remembered but after all, he's helped others in Capernaum, of course he'll take care of us.

Jesus thought, whether by prophetic insight or just a student of human nature, calls them out: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you; no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

I can imagine the people asking "Why is he telling us about the great things God did for those outsiders, foreigners? What about us? We're the chosen ones?" It must have sounded as if one of their own had turned on them, as if Jesus had betrayed and rejected them. That's the kind of talk that gets prophets killed and truth tellers stoned (Luke 13:34). When they heard Jesus' words "they were filled with rage." They ran him out of town and tried to throw him off the cliff. If you don't like the message, kill the messenger.

Jesus has a vision for his ministry and the people have another, a different vision. The people's own expectations have deafened them to the fulfillment of the scriptures. They are so caught up in their own agenda they cannot hear, let alone participate in, God's agenda. What do you think? Does that ever happen in today's world? In our church? In our own lives? Despite our

own agenda, our own vision, Jesus, is guided by the concerns of God and the scriptural prophecies that came before him. He will not let himself be coopted by the people of Nazareth.

Don't think of Nazareth as simply a geographical location, a town in Israel. It is a way of being, a way of seeing others, and a way of trying to control God. Anytime we privilege ourselves over another before God, anytime we see our group as more deserving than another of God's goodness and grace, anytime we feel entitled, to the exclusion of others, of God's life and love, we are living in Nazareth. Jesus will pass through our midst and go on his way.

Jesus broke the bonds of kinship that day in Nazareth, not as a rejection of the hometown, but as the way of enlarging the hometown. No one would be excluded. No one would receive special favors. No one would be left out. All are the recipients of the prophecy's fulfillment.

That's not always a popular agenda and it's not always our agenda, but it is always God's agenda, God's vision. God's purpose, God's agenda is an agenda of love.

David Lose, from Luther seminary asks, "So what are we to do? Now that Jesus' words have revealed the truth that we've got just as much fear and shame and prejudice as did the folks in Nazareth, what are we to do?"

What are we to do?

Our gospel reading from last week ending with this declaration and today's gospel reading begins – "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

God's love has been fulfilled in your life – today. Thanks be to God for that gift but God's agenda isn't just for you but for all and where is God calling you to see that fulfillment in this world but also where are. We have a God that is so passionate for God's people that God takes on our lot and our life, becomes one of us, even to the point of dying for us, only to come back bring again a word of forgiveness and grace. For this God loves all God's children –

desperately, passionately, relentlessly – and that includes you and me but it also includes those that we think don't deserve it, those who don't know it, those who the world says are on the outside.

There's a t-shirt that says "Jesus love you – but I'm his favorite". Well not quite, but the good news is that the time of God's favor is still being fulfilled in our hearing, right here, right now. We have been raised to new life, to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captive, and freedom to the oppressed. Jesus passed through the midst of the people gathered in Nazareth that day but instead of just leaving, he invites us on this journey with him. Thanks be to God.

Amen