

1.23.22

In his new autobiography, the Christian author Philip Yancey tells the story of the death of his father, which Yancey himself was not aware of until he found a newspaper clipping at the age of 18. Yancey's father was a strong, healthy, 23 year old missionary raising funds to go to Africa with his wife, 3 year old son, and Philip, who was only a few months old when he tragically contracted polio. Philip's father was placed in an iron lung for many months until a few earnest supporters reasoned with certainty that God's will for this young, gifted man could not possibly be to waste away in an iron lung. God really needed him, so they prayed for his healing, claiming that it would certainly be so, and against the wishes of his doctors, Philip Yancey's father left the hospital, went home, and died after nine days. The enduring lesson that Yancey draws from this horrible part of his story that negatively impacted his whole family and early life was that "people who speak for God are not always speaking for God."

People who speak for God are not always speaking for God. I cringe when I hear Christians, and especially leaders in the church, speak on God's behalf with a certainty about things we cannot be certain about. Christians must speak for God and about God with great humility, and when we forget that and are wrong, there are only two parties to blame, God or the victim. That is heartbreaking when it happens, and we should always speak with great humility when we speak for God. People who speak for God are not always speaking for God.

In our Gospel reading this morning from St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus speaks for God. Where John's Gospel begins Jesus' public ministry with the miraculous transformation of water into wine as sign of what Jesus has come to do, Luke's Gospel begins with Jesus proclaiming good news in his home synagogue in Nazareth. Luke frequently reminds us that Jesus and his family were faithful attenders of both the Temple for the high feasts in Jerusalem, and in their local

congregation. As is customary, Jesus goes to the small synagogue in his village, and it is here where his public ministry begins.

Jesus unrolls a scroll in the synagogue during the Hebrew liturgy of the Word, and turns to the Prophet Isaiah, Isaiah 61, and reads “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

It is worth pausing for a moment just to recognize what is going on. Even God himself in human flesh, Jesus Christ, will not speak a word to begin his ministry that is apart from, or detached from, or disconnected from Holy Scripture. Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit, and the purpose of the Holy Spirit here, as always, is not to make a grand spectacle for its own sake, but to point to God in Jesus Christ. In other words, even God will not speak a word to us that cannot be grounded in Scripture. This is what it looks like to speak with humility for God, modeled by God himself in Jesus Christ, though the claims Jesus will make about himself are not claims we can make. Jesus carries with Him the very authority of God as God, and will not announce the beginning of his mission and ministry apart from the Word of God.

A natural question to ask at this point is why our lectionary does not include Isaiah 61 as the Old Testament reading, since that is the passage Jesus preaches from in his sermon in the synagogue. The scene from our Old Testament lesson in Nehemiah takes place as the Israelites return to Jerusalem from exile and hear and read the Law for the first time in ages, even in generations. They weep, both in response to the power of the Word, but also because they recognize how far their own lives are from the standards set in the law. And Nehemiah, as their spiritual father, speaks an incredible word to them, “do not mourn or weep... go your way. Eat

the fat and drink sweet wine... for this day is Holy to the Lord.” In other words, Nehemiah says, rejoice, have a great feast, throw a party, because now we have God with us again, because we have God’s word with us again. Nehemiah, like Luke, points to the fact that life as God’s people means life rooted in God’s Word for us.

It is in light of that story that we can interpret Christ’s own unveiling of himself in the synagogue, not apart from or in competition with God’s word, but in fulfillment of it. Even God will not speak to us apart from His word, though he alone could.

Returning to Luke’s Gospel, as I mentioned previously, Jesus is reading directly from Isaiah 61. Isaiah 61 is the second of three long poems describing the signs that will accompany the arrival of God’s new kingdom and perfect Jerusalem. The primary sign is to be a person, the anointed one, or Messiah. Our own modern chapter divisions neatly divide these three poems into chapters 60, 61, and 62 of Isaiah, and these poems are all central verses to the theme of the Epiphany season. Isaiah 60 begins, “arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” That is, in fact, the Old Testament lesson for the day of Epiphany, as it goes on to describe the kings of nations bringing gifts to this anointed one. Isaiah 62, the third poem, has a similar focus, that all of the nations will come to God through the restored people of God. Isaiah 61 is obviously the poem in the middle, and in Hebrew ordering of poetry, the middle is where you look to find the core meaning of the poem.

This core of the poem, and what makes Isaiah 61 unique, is that among the three poems, Isaiah 61 focuses completely on this person, the one who says “the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.” We are probably familiar with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the one who was crushed for iniquities, by whose wounds we are healed, all of those verses we hear during Holy

Week. Isaiah 61 connects the anointed one whose presence among Israel and the nations will signal that God is doing something new with that suffering servant. They are the same person. And it is also clear as we continue in Isaiah 61 that the anointed one who speaks refers to himself as “I the Lord.” In other words, this suffering servant of Isaiah who is the anointed one is none other than God. The early church referred to the Book of Isaiah as the “fifth gospel,” for how clearly it witnesses to Jesus Christ, it is not difficult to see why.

Jesus returns the scroll, and all eyes are focused on him, the hometown boy now speaking for God in the synagogue. And his proclamation astounds everyone, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” To people who watched him grow up, know his brothers and sisters and parents, he says, “I am this anointed one of whom Isaiah speaks. I am the one who was promised, I am the fulfillment of this Holy Scripture. I am God’s answer to this prophecy. I am God with you.”

While our reading this morning does not go this far, we will read next week that Nazareth ultimately rejects Jesus, and tries to kill him for pointing to himself as the fulfillment of this Scripture. This is Joseph’s son, they say, we know this kid, how can he be the one Isaiah is talking about? It is only a strange miracle that enables Jesus to disappear into the crowd, and avoid being thrown down the cliff that the ancient city of Nazareth was situated on. This event explains why Jesus’ ministry primarily takes place among Gentiles and Jews on the margins in Luke’s Gospel, because his own people have rejected him.

To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, Jesus is either a lunatic, at the very least a diagnosable narcissist and sociopath, or he really is the Messiah, the anointed one, even God himself. A friend and mentor often reminds me that it is never wise to confuse yourself with God, and that only two kinds of people do it. Those who are mentally ill, and those in Christian ministry.

Speaking on behalf of God as God himself with the Word of God, Jesus begins his public ministry in Nazareth as a messenger with a message. That message is very clear, as Jesus echoes the song his mother sang at the promise of his birth, the Magnificat: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

The temptation that many fall into in churches all around us, and in churches like our own, is to separate this message from the messenger, and to make the false choice of emphasizing and clinging to either one or the other. We can embrace Jesus the moral teacher, Jesus the organizer, Jesus the visionary, Jesus for the poor, or we can embrace Jesus who just came to get me to heaven, without causing us the discomfort of addressing the fruits of sin in our economic and political lives. We cannot separate Jesus from his message, because Jesus is both the messenger and the message he brings.

There are many ways this has been expressed in Classical Christian teaching. Jesus is the “proclaimer who is proclaimed,” who does not only bring us good news, but is himself the good news that he brings to us. The great 17th century Anglican divine Lancelot Andrewes put it like this in a sermon on the Song of Simeon from Luke’s Gospel, that “Christ is not a savior only, but salvation itself of whose fullness we receive.” Jesus did not bring us a salvation that is separate from Himself.

Jesus did not come to point to a way to get to God that we must then follow ourselves, but he brings God to us as God. Jesus did not come showing us a way of life that we must imitate. Jesus has not left us with a mission or an assignment that we are responsible for completing before he gives himself to us again. Jesus is himself the way to life with God, himself

the mission, himself the message he brings, and so the scandal in that little synagogue in Nazareth his own people must either take Jesus at his word or emphatically reject him is the same scandal in little St. Peter's this morning. Can we really believe him, "today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?"

In my time as a Priest I have found that there are few things as dangerous as a Christian who believes that God needs them. God needs us to accomplish the mission he begins in Luke chapter 4, of care for the poor, oppressed, and outcast. God needs us to share the gospel to the ends of the earth, or else it will never get there. God needs us to save our nation from the advance of liberalism, or socialism, or whatever scary "ism" rules the cable networks that day by whatever means necessary, or else we will lose it. God needs us to be the perfect church to reach our city. God needs us to reduplicate Jesus' spiritual life. God even needs us to do these things, or something like them, before he will come back and rule forever like he has promised. In other words, Christians, get your act together, because God is waiting for you to get your act together, the very promises of God depend on them. Jesus showed you how to do it, now do it.

Telling people that God needs them is a great way to raise money, it is a great way to encourage involvement in missions, it is a great way to convince people that politics are eternally significant; but, it is a lie. It is undoubtedly a well-meaning, convincing lie that strikes at the heart of our concern for the suffering of others, our anxieties about the future, and our concern that people know Jesus like we do, but it is still a lie. Jesus Christ is the mission, the message, the very salvation that he proclaims. In Him, God will bring all of his promises to completion, frankly, with or without us. Jesus Christ is always fulfillment, we are not. God does not bring his life to us in Jesus Christ because he needs us to complete a mission for him. He brings us that life because he loves us.

Today in this third Sunday in Epiphany, Jesus Christ is manifested to us as God in human flesh through the power of God's holy word, the holy spirit, and Jesus' own witness to himself. In his speaking and in our hearing "scripture has been fulfilled." What is true in that little synagogue, where God's promises are read and heard; and Jesus says I fulfill it, is just as true in our little church today, and in every corner of the world. Because whenever he speaks and we hear, "scripture has been fulfilled." Jesus Christ is the beginning, the end, and the means of completing the mission that God is working through him for us, the proclaimer proclaimed. Amen.