

THIS BLESSED DAY

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-30

***“Then [Jesus] began to say to them,
‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”***

Luke 14:21

You’d think the Son of God would have done better before a hometown crowd: but Jesus’ preaching gig at the synagogue in Nazareth is pretty much a bust.

There he is, fresh from his successful battle with the devil. The tempter had thrown everything he had at him, back there in the wilderness: offers of power, wealth and fame. Jesus resisted them all. At the end of the day, the score was Jesus 3, the devil 0. The tempter slunk off in shame, waiting for what Luke calls “an opportune time.”

Jesus is flying high. He visited a few other communities on the way back to Nazareth, and he was a sensation. Now it’s time to bring his road show to the old hometown.

You’d think it would have been a slam-dunk success: a familiar setting, people he’s known all his life. His reputation has preceded him. In Nazareth, it ought to be “hometown boy makes good.”

But no. Jesus’ hometown debut is quite the opposite.

Maybe it was his sermon. It certainly doesn't sound like much, the way Luke tells the story. Jesus stands up in the synagogue, opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and begins to read:

“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.”

OK. So far, so good. But then Jesus does the unexpected. He closes the scroll and takes his seat — which doesn't mean he's finished; sitting down was the preferred position for rabbis as they taught the scriptures. He presents his sermon, and it's just one line: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Remarkably, the people still “speak well of him.” That may be a carryover of that hometown-boy-makes-good sentiment. But then, Jesus quits preachin' and goes to meddlin', as they say.

In the Bible study that follows, he directs their attention to several inconvenient truths: referring to a couple stories in the Bible about great prophets who shunned the people of Israel and reached out instead to foreigners. Elijah dined with the widow of Zarephath — a Gentile. Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian.

Dare we say that the good people of Nazareth are just a little bit racist? At the very least, they don't want their belief in Jewish exceptionalism to be questioned. They don't want to be reminded of stories like these, in which God shows an interest in immigrants.

Quick as you please, they turn on him. They try to run him out of town, by the shortest possible route: off the edge of a cliff! But Jesus coolly turns back in the direction of the angry crowd, walking straight towards them. As he gets closer, the crowd parts, making a way for him to walk through, unharmed.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” I always thought that what offended the Nazareth crowd was the messianic aspect of that statement. Scriptures fulfilled? How can this be? This is Jesus — Joseph's and Mary's boy. That kid sure is getting a swelled head!

Maybe it's the messiah thing that raises the crowd's hackles. But maybe it's something else. Maybe it's the very first word Jesus uses: the word “today.”

“Today” can be a mighty threatening word if what you're talking about is the intrusion of God into our world: the Lord making some actual demands on us. It's far easier to talk about God mucking around in the distant past, or fixing to arrive sometime in the far-off, mysterious future.

Either one of those options would have been more comfortable for the good people of Nazareth. No doubt, they were people who loved their heritage. They took pride in who they were, and where they'd come from. They were God's chosen people, after all. Why, it was *their* ancestors who'd followed Moses through the wilderness for 40 years, then conquered the promised land, then set up the magnificent kingdom of David and his son Solomon, then survived the exile in Babylon to return home again with gladness. These were the proud facts of their history: nobody could take them away from them — no matter how harshly the Romans oppressed them.

I've known people like that. Maybe you have, too. These are people who go on Ancestor.com and get bitten by the genealogy bug. Before they know it, they're downloading page after page of birth and death records.

Years ago, before we were married, my wife Claire worked in the library of the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. People would come into the place to research their family tree. One day, a fellow came in who announced that he was finished with his family tree.

How can anyone ever be finished with a family tree, Claire wondered? Well, this guy showed her. He pulled out an elegant document he'd purchased from some place or other, all hand-lettered with calligraphy pens and colored by hand.

Moving backwards through time, it listed one pair of Maryland ancestors after another, until the family line jumped the ocean, setting up shop in Europe. There it prospered for many more generations past, eventually making its way to the Middle East. At some point, it intersected with the Biblical genealogies, and — what do you know? — it ended up with Cain and his mom and dad, Adam and Eve. Claire didn't have the heart to tell the guy he'd been had: that he'd blown a whole lot of good money on junk genealogy.

For him, it was all about the past. He could have been sleeping in his car, for all he cared. As long as he had that certificate, verifying that he had the blood of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob running through his veins, he was a bona-fide V.I.P.!

Churches can be like that sometimes. Those that have a lot of history can sometimes become fixated on their glorious past. But churches don't have to have a very long history at all to engage in that sort of behavior. Sometimes it's a matter of remembering back just a generation or so. Remember when we had a full Sunday School, bursting at the seams? Remember when there were no soccer leagues that played on Sunday mornings, and no stores open, either, so everybody who was anybody came to church? If only we can figure out the right formula to bring those glory days back again, everything will be just fine!

The cartoonist Doug Larson once said that “Nostalgia is a file that removes the rough edges from the good old days.” And that’s the long and the short of it. Memories that fixate on the glories of the past are highly selective. They cheerfully take the good and conveniently forget the bad.

I expect there was some of that selective remembering going on in Nazareth the day Jesus said “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

There’s an equally seductive tendency, in matters of faith, to focus on the future. That, too, can be a way of escaping the demands of living in the present.

Charles Dickens created a famous character for his novel, *David Copperfield*: a man known as Mr. Micawber. The circumstances of his life are not all that great —Micawber and his wife are always living hand to mouth — but the man is an eternal optimist. He has only the vaguest of plans for bettering his condition, and the plans he does have are focused on the singular conviction that, in his words, “Something will turn up.”

Micawber’s the sort of person who, when asked what sort of investments he has for the future, will cheerfully answer: “Lottery tickets!” As long as there’s some possibility, however slight, of a financial windfall, that hope is enough to sustain him.

The churchy equivalent is to focus attention almost exclusively on Bible passages that foretell the future: the so-called prophecies of the end times. Churches like these are all about speculating when Christ is going to return, based on arcane clues found in current events. They're so busy running those calculations, in fact, that they have very little time for service to others in the here-and-now — unless “service to others” is defined as explaining to them the end-time prophecies, so they, too, can repent and be saved on the last day.

In the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus is fixated neither on the past nor on the future, but on the present. “TODAY this scripture is fulfilled.” Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today. Maybe, just maybe, it was his relentless focus on the present that caused his neighbors to try to toss him over a cliff. The one thing they really weren't interested in seeing, in their quaint little town, was a religious revival that would raise hard questions like “What's God calling us to do in the here and now?”

Not long ago, some of us were making New Year's resolutions. How's that going for you, by the way?

Chances are, the answer to that question is “Not very well,” or the ever-popular variant, “WHAT resolution?” In truth, the track record for keeping New Year's resolutions is not all that great.

Here's the reason. A New Year's resolution is almost entirely future-oriented. It's very easy, shortly before that ball drops at Times Square, to promise ourselves "I'm going to lose weight," or "quit smoking" or "get my financial house in order." It's so easy to look to the future and enjoy a harmless little fantasy that promises, "This year's going to be different. This year, I'll actually do it!"

But what if New Year's resolutions weren't so future-oriented? Rather than resolving, "This year, I'm going to change," what if they said, "Right now I'm going to change"?

It takes that kind of determined focus on the present to bring about real change. The only resolutions that actually succeed have an element of the present in them, not just the future. They may begin life as New Year's resolutions, but they don't stay that way for long. On January 2nd, they transform themselves into "Today's resolution," and remain so for each day that follows.

The thing that really and truly scared that congregation at Nazareth was the prospect that God was present and active in their midst. Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God": fearful because our God is a God of transformation. God doesn't enter our lives just to become a piece of ornamental furniture, or to hang around in a symbolic way like the proverbial Bible

on the coffee table. God enters our lives in order to transform them: and that is never easy, nor comfortable, nor instantaneous.

My hope for this congregation is that together we can live into the sort of spiritual practice described by Frederick Buechner, who defines the word “today” as follows:

“It is a moment of light surrounded on all sides by darkness and oblivion. In the entire history of the universe, let alone in your own history, there has never been another just like it and there will never be another just like it again. It is the point to which all your yesterdays have been leading since the hour of your birth. It is the point from which all your tomorrows will proceed until the hour of your death. If you were aware of how precious it is, you could hardly live through it. Unless you are aware of how precious it is, you can hardly be said to be living at all.”¹

“This is the day which the Lord has made,” says Psalm 118. “Let us rejoice and be glad in it” (v. 24). Or weep and be sad in it, if that’s your portion for that particular day. The point is to see it for what it is, because it will be gone before you know it. Waste it, and it’s not just time you’re wasting. It’s your life. Look the other way, and it may be that what you miss is the moment you’ve been waiting for.

All other days have either disappeared into darkness or not yet emerged from it. Today is the only day there is.

¹Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperOne, 2009).

The greatest saints and spiritual sages are people who have mastered the knack of living perfectly and intentionally in the present, with just that sort of awareness. Today, may you follow their example. Today, may you be able to sing “This is the day the Lord has made,” and really, truly mean it.

Let us pray:

**This is the day, O Lord. This is the day.
And we are your people.
Grant us to live, most deeply and intentionally, in the now:
this blessed today.
In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

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