

Epiphany 3

January 23, 2022

Luke 4: 14-21

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It's called "inversion therapy"--you might have seen it on a late night infomercial, you might have even tried it. For a while, it was all the rage--alleviating neck and back pain by taking gravity and literally "standing it on it's head." You strap on boots that hook to a table that then flips upright, with you suspended head down and feet in the air.

Supposedly, this takes a load off your tired and cramped vertebrae, expanding and realigning them. And, if you can manage a few sit ups or torso twists while you're hanging there, even better!

The only problem is one you might already be thinking about: You're picturing yourself, aren't you? Me? Hanging upside down? Are you kidding?! And that's it, isn't it--maybe it's a great idea, it might even be helpful--but it's awkward, it's uncomfortable, and with the blood rushing to your head, body parts don't work the way they are supposed to (or stay where they're supposed to.)

Turning things upside down, shaking up perspectives was Jesus' specialty. He taught "inversion therapy" from his first sermon to his last breath and beyond. Let's face it--that might not be the first thing we think about when we say the name "Jesus," but today's Gospel, and next week's continuation of this scene in his home synagogue make it very clear that this is what Jesus was all about.

Jesus is on a preaching/healing tour of Galilee as Luke's Gospel gets moving; speaking and teaching in the village synagogues. The response to his teaching was fantastic--who doesn't love a guest preacher? You get to hear a new voice, maybe some new stories, maybe the new guy isn't nearly as long-winded as your usual rabbi...

“Praised by everyone,” today’s Gospel says. “Praised by everyone”--until Jesus came to the hometown of Nazareth. Have you ever gone home to where you were raised, or maybe more likely for most of us, gone “home” to a family reunion?

Oh, the fun--everyone insists on calling you ‘Billy’ or ‘Janie’ or ‘Red,’ even though no one has called you that in decades...they hug you and exclaim how big/skinny/fat/grey you’ve gotten...and they don’t want to hear about your job or your degree--they want to talk about that one time your Mom washed your mouth out with soap...They *claim* you, they *love* you--the way *they* want you to be. And when you walk away to talk to someone else--that’s when the real discussion starts, right?

Home to Nazareth, where Jesus was raised. We can imagine that the word got out and there’s a sense of excitement in worship that Sabbath--*their* boy had come back. How wonderful to hear the scripture from one of their own; to hear comfort and encouragement and God’s love which would be directed right to them...

Luke sketches the scene so vividly for us--Jesus stands up from the congregation. The synagogue attendant hands him a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, doubtless the only copy in town (no personal scrolls or pew scrolls). Jesus unrolls this treasured scroll and locates the day’s text from the prophet Isaiah, and reads aloud: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; 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.*

Then Jesus re-rolls the scroll, returns it to the attendant and sits down, because this was the customary posture for a rabbi to teach. The drama intensifies, as “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” Everyone’s filled with anticipation, locked in, tuned in to what Jesus is going to say next.

Now, I can imagine you’ve heard some sermons that set your head spinning, or bored you to death, or made you say “Huh??” But a one sentence sermon? Bet you’ve never heard that!

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. One sentence. If you weren't listening, you missed it. (Except as we will hear next week, no one did, and Jesus will decide to elaborate a bit.)

If we want to know who Jesus is, why Jesus came, and what Jesus' is about, this is the passage. When we remember passages, stories from the New Testament, this isn't usually one that is marked as a favorite. Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus feeds 5,000, Jesus in the garden on Easter morning--sure, all those and more. But in these verses, Jesus proclaims the fulfillment of God's upside down mission: God has sent the Messiah to challenge, to change the way the world works:

Those who have no place in the world ***have first place in God's heart***: those in poverty, the prisoner, the disabled, those *we* oppress to sustain our standard of living, those who long for release from crushing hopelessness--these are the beloved people Jesus came for--Today, he says. Now.

Now you and I might want to soften this one-sentence sermon: *Well*, we say to ourselves, *I've lived paycheck to paycheck*; or *I've felt captive to certain things*; or *we're all blind in one way or another*.

And all that might be true, and we've all had the grace of God in Christ poured out on us--but that's not what Jesus is talking about here. In the synagogue at Nazareth, and in the sanctuary of Augustana ***today*** Jesus is prodding us to remember the mission of the Messiah: to embody God's love and care for those who are the least in our world--people we often avoid, despise, blame, or would just like to forget about--and to invite us to follow that mission.

When we tell ourselves that Jesus' mission was to make us feel better, or fit in our box, we've missed the whole point of Jesus' first sermon.

It's not easy--to figure out how to give, and serve, and lay down our lives (because that's the other invitation that Jesus will give, isn't it?) Jesus' "inversion therapy" is a challenge. Each of us, and this community of faith, are invited to put our hearts where God's heart is.

