

### **Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 27**

How shall we see Jesus today? How would our lives be different if we started out every day with that question? It is the season of Epiphany and God is revealing Jesus for our eyes to see. Having “hidden” him in the flesh of humanity through the Christmas miracle of Incarnation, in these weeks of Epiphany, God now brings Jesus out and lets us see that this peasant of Galilee is also the Son of God.

Of course one way to do that is to see miracles, as we did last week with the changing of water into wine. We could also see the gathering of disciples; although that motif is more pronounced in years A and B. We have already heard the voice from heaven proclaim him to be the Son of God and beloved and pleasing to God.

How will we see him today? We see him looking strangely like God today, but not the God of our expectations. Rather we see Jesus as the shocking God who confounds our expectations. Today we do not see Jesus in his victory over some demon, or leprosy, or even in raising the dead. Today we see him as God in the fact of his rejection and his use of that very rejection to be the act of salvation for the very people who reject him. Today, as Jesus preaches his first sermon, and really one of the only ones recorded in the Gospels other than the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, we see the crowds grow angry with Jesus. They initially are impressed and seem to love him, but not for long. The message veers off course in their opinion and soon they take him outside the village as if to cast him from the top of the hill to his death. They reject him. And in this he really does look like God, the God whom the Israelites have been rejecting for centuries, the God whom our generation continues to reject.

Today as we hear this Gospel lesson, Jesus passes through this crowd of murderous fellow-countrymen. Before too many months have passed, however, he will once more face a crowd of angry fellow Jews who seek his life. At this point his ministry has run its course. He has taught the crowds and his twelve disciples, and he has born witness to the truth of God’s kingdom; he has healed the sick, cast out the demon, fed the multitudes, and raised the dead. He could of course walk through that crowd as easily as he does this one. But he does not. He submits to their murderous intent, endures their blows, the scourge, the lies, the cross, and finally, the epitome of a loser, he breathes his last and hangs lifeless and limp from that cross, a corpse.

The challenge for the preacher today will be to proclaim that this looks like God to us. It remains as shocking to us as it did to the people of old. Respectable messiahs don’t get themselves killed this way. Our human nature still wants a winner, the right sort of Savior who loves the right sort of people, people like me. But as Jesus pointed out, Naaman and the widow of Zaraphath were the wrong sorts of people, at least in the eyes of that first audience.

What makes this story so remarkable is not only that Jesus will be rejected, but in his rejection will in fact also become the very Savior he proclaims himself to be. Herein lies the great mystery of God’s kingdom. The victory is not had by God smashing the foe, but by God being rejected,

murdered, and despised by the very people whom He is saving. This is what God looks like. He lost the wrestling match with Jacob, he was cheated on by his spouse (Hosea), he put up with the rebellious and stiff necked people of Moses day, and much more. When any respectable god would have lashed out with righteous wrath against his people, he forgave and loved them still.

This is not a pushover God, we preach, but a God of a different sort of strength. Not what we expect, but what he is.

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*“Mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth your hand to heal and defend us.” We have spoken before of how contrary this is to our culture. This view of the human being as fundamentally weak and infirm does not sit well with the typical American ethos. But even less attractive is the method of God’s outreach to us. We might be willing to admit that we have some weaknesses but our prayer usually is that God would give us of his strength to attend to those weaknesses. This is not really what God does. He takes up our infirmities, he joins us in them. We want him to take the infirmities away, not jump into this cesspool with us. To our amazement, the hand of God’s majesty that extends to us with healing and defense is found with a nail firmly attaching it to a cross.*

*Some time ago in our discussion of the baptism of our Lord we considered the salvific nature of the baptism of Jesus and lamented that there are those who think the Gospel has not been preached if we don’t mention the cross, as if the entire Jesus event was not part of that story. We called it a sort of cruciform reductionism.*

*But today the cross is at the center of this story and it is there as a scandal to us. Instead of being the comfortable message which we long to hear, this proclamation of the cross is disquieting and disturbing.*

*This is another great prayer to drop the semi-colon. Try it, take it out after “us” in the middle line and this prayer really changes for the better.*

*The prayer asks Jesus to heal and defend us. We want him to heal and defend the poor and helpless folks in every dire spot, which is good, but this prayer demands that we assume the posture of the needy; we are the infirm. In fact, is the poor man who praises God after some catastrophe for saving his life in the earthquake, fire, hurricane, or just his poverty, perhaps better off than a guy like me who is distracted by so many things and concerns in this life?*

### **Readings**

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. <sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup> And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. <sup>4</sup> *And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.* <sup>5</sup> And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. <sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup> *Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.* <sup>8</sup> They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

<sup>9</sup> And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. <sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” <sup>11</sup> *So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.”* <sup>12</sup> *And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*

*In the past we have heard this text as something of an indictment of our worship. The scene depicted here seems to be an ideal worship event. We wondered if Jesus came to my church on Sunday, and we all knew he was there, would we do anything differently? Why? Would the altar guild prepare the altar differently? Would the preacher write a better sermon? Would we all sing a little louder or participate differently? Would be more apt to invite a friend to join us? Ezra and Nehemiah seem to be presiding over a perfect worship service. The people listen attentively, they worship piously, they are emotionally moved, and they heed the admonition to celebrate. Our theology says that Jesus is in fact in worship with us every Sunday. Do we act that way?*

*This text seems to be present on this day as a foil to the Gospel lesson where Jesus reads the words of the Torah and while the people are attentive, they end up being murderous. Here they read the Torah, the people repent, and Nehemiah more or less ends up telling them they are*

*supposed to be happy and forcing them to eat a feast. He almost has to force a celebration on them. On second thought, maybe that is just another example of the people of God just not getting what God through his servants is talking about. We are always out of tune with him it seems.*

*There are two verses left out of the reading which I have included, but you can see why they were left out. The names are enough to cause any lay reader or a preacher for that matter considerable difficulty. It appears that the returning community of Jews was really quite small. In fact up through Jesus' day, almost 500 years after these events, many more Jews lived in Babylon and Egypt than lived in the promised land of Judea and Galilee.*

*These names were then probably pretty important. It allowed the descendents and relatives of these men to point to the names of these men. "That's my great uncle Akkub there in verse 7!" Of course for us, who are separated by thousands of years and different familial connections, this is not so significant.*

*For the Jewish people who came back from exile, as well as those who remained in Babylon and Egypt at this time, this text became somewhat normative of their experience. It appears that prior to the exile the people of God really did not pay much attention to the books we would call the Old Testament, even the Torah. At the time of Josiah they found one copy in the Temple, read it to the king, and he was clearly troubled by what he heard. What troubles us is that he had never heard this stuff before! Talk about Biblical illiteracy! From the reforms that he enacts at that point it looks like he was listening to Deuteronomy, or perhaps the whole Torah.*

*The exile seemed to change the attitudes of the people to the written Word. The Jewish people became intensely focused on the Bible, especially the books of Moses. The synagogue developed and it became the local place where people gathered to listen to the Word and people expound upon its meaning. Really, because our worship services seem to have been patterned after Synagogue services with which the first Christians were familiar, this could be seen as the first Church service.*

*When Jesus shows up on the scene in Capernaum, the folks who are gathered at the synagogue that day are trying to make like these folks who listen attentively, who weep when confronted by their sins and who gladly hear words of comfort and exhortation from their leaders. Any worshiping community wants to be like this bunch of people. They get so much right.*

*Notice especially the deference paid to the book and to the one who reads the book of Moses. The people stand up when the book is opened. The priest blesses God and them and they speak a double "amen." Notice as well the attention the paid to the matter of understanding. There are Levites there to help the people understand what they have read.*

*At the end of the reading take note that the reaction of the people is also prescribed. They were weeping, but Ezra and the priests exhort them to joy and feasting. The joy of the LORD is their strength.*

*It is a picture of the perfect worship service, really, the sort of thing that every synagogue service would strive for and what we would strive for too in much of our worship. This is what is supposed to do. The word is reverently and effectively presented; the people listen attentively, are touched by what they hear and are open to the encouragement and exhortation of the servants of God. The preacher on this day might just want to preach about worship, especially when you consider some of the themes in the Gospel lesson!*

*“The people gathered as one man” would really work well for a tie in to the Epistle lesson here.*

*This is a marvelous picture of the Church which Christ creates. We see a group of people here who are empowered by the action of the Word, they are united, they are enjoined not to mourn, but to joy in the Lord which is their strength. It is missional, they are to share with the one who has nothing. It is very attractive in its picture of unity and peace.*

*Sermon Idea – Don’t persist in your penitential groveling when he has given you status as the very children of God! He has forgiven and restored you – own that! Be what he has made you to be – celebrate it! This might build on last week’s reading – God is not a grumpy old guy who is looking for a reason to afflict us, but he is a God who delights in joy. Jesus turned a lot of water in to wine to make for a really good wedding for some young couple.*

Psalm 19:(1-6) 7-14

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

<sup>2</sup> Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.

<sup>4</sup> Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun,

<sup>5</sup> which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,  
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.

<sup>6</sup> Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them,  
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

<sup>7</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;

the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;

<sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right,

rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;  
<sup>9</sup> the fear of the LORD is clean,  
enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
and righteous altogether.  
<sup>10</sup> More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey  
and drippings of the honeycomb.  
<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.  
<sup>12</sup> Who can discern his errors?  
Declare me innocent from hidden faults.  
<sup>13</sup> Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;  
let them not have dominion over me!  
Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.  
<sup>14</sup> Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

*If you preach the worship sermon suggested above, you might want to address the final verse of this psalm which is used by many preachers prior to delivering a sermon or homily. But you may also want to explore the rest of this noteworthy psalm. The first part observes that the heavens declare the glory of God. In a world which has largely ascribed these things to the impersonal forces of a mindless nature, the psalmist reminds us that we can see the handiwork of God when we look up to the sky. Does that take faith? Yes. Do we prove God's existence by looking at the stars? No, at least not in a way that any skeptic will be moved to change his/her mind. But that does not make our assertion or claim any less valid or useful, especially as we encourage one another. One should also be aware that we may have more in common with that skeptic than with the psalmist. The psalmist believed that the stars were living beings, angelic creatures who quite literally praised God and declared his glory. We tend to see them as a large ball of burning gas which is operating on a natural principle.*

*Perhaps harder for us is the middle section in which the psalmist addresses the beauty of God's Word and especially his Law. Remember this describes Jesus as much as it commands us to behavior. Jesus delighted in the Law of God. It is his honeycomb and more precious to him than the fine gold of Ophir.*

*That Law of God was fulfilled by him in his life, death, and resurrection. That Law is what brought him to us and which resulted in our salvation. For the Law of God (here used in the broad sense which includes both Law and Gospel) not only tells us of his demands, but also his promises. It is sweet to us as well and precious.*

*Indeed who can discern himself? God's word discerns for us and to us. Praise him for it.*

I Corinthians 12:12-31a

<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.

<sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

<sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, <sup>24</sup> which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

*And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

*Context is everything here, and it is important to remember that the very next chapter, the next verses are the great hymn to love which comprises chapter 13 of I Corinthians.*

*Here Paul uses the imagery of the body very effectively and the preacher will really want to stick with that. There is no need to go looking further for a way to preach this. The church is similar to a body, a body made up of many and various parts.*

*The differences in the various parts of the body are not a problem, they are not a sign of fundamental disunity, and in fact they are very necessary and make the body healthy and functional. Thus, if we were the same, not only would this be perhaps boring, but it would also mean that we were unhealthy and non-functional. Paul's audience, remember is a congregation riven by factionalism. They are noticing the differences of the "other" and seeing that as weakness, problem, occasion for scorn, derision, hostility, etc. Paul would have them see this a totally different light.*

*He then goes on to make very effective use of the fact that we don't treat all our body parts the same way. Some of them are considered weaker but they are indispensable and others are less honorable so they are treated with greater honor. Being equally loved by God and each other does not mean uniformity in the way that we are treated, but it means appropriate love in word and deed.*

*I remember one of my old professors used to say that when the Spirit came into the situation, one simply had to throw the mathematics out the window. The Trinity does not make sense, the incarnation makes no mathematical sense, and his special point on this was that the Spirit and the love he brings from God are indivisible and not quantifiable. In other words, loved by God is loved by God, having the Spirit is having the Spirit, there is no measurement to make. The man who in the Spirit arrives a little early to church to sweep the steps cannot be said to be less Spiritual than the evangelist who preaches to millions. In the body, one is shown to the world, the other is hidden from view, but the same Spirit inhabits them both.*

*God so composed the honor that the parts that need the greater honor and modesty get it. We wear pants for this reason. God so composed his church that the parts fit together, interrelate, and complement one another. The whole body holds together this way and its various parts become integral to the whole. If something small like a toe or a tooth hurts, the whole body suffers with them. Likewise in the body of Christ, the suffering of one is the suffering born by the body in various ways. In the human body, the various glands, organs, and biological processes rush necessary antibodies, white blood cells and the building blocks of healing through the blood stream in a marvelous synchronicity. Likewise today we can point to the work of Christian volunteers in disaster zones devastated by nature. We can also point to Christians who are bravely loving and serving the refugee and even the one who might define himself as our enemy. We could also point to the man or woman who visits the elderly and shut-in or who helps a child learn to read. They are each the body of Christ rushing to help another part.*

*You are all the body of Christ in which this Spirit dwells. Some are prophets, others apostles, some preachers and teachers and deacons. Some exercise gifts of healing and others administration and generosity, speaking in tongues and working miracles. No, not everyone does*



*this, just as the body is not all an eye or a hand. It would starve without the teeth and the stomach. I remember my grandmother suffered terribly for some time because her body was unable to process a certain nutrient. When they supplemented the enzyme her body lacked, she was a completely different sort of person. When it works, as it does in most of us, I cannot see it. It is a very humble little thing, something which when it works in all of us, we never think about, but I certainly saw when it was missing.*

*Paul ends this with an exhortation to the higher gifts, which presents the preacher with another possible preaching theme. It is easy to desire the flashy and the obviously significant gifts, but Paul exhorts to a trio of the highest gifts which he says are common and essential to all: Faith, Hope, and Love. The greatest of these is love. It is tempting to say that ability to speak eloquently or in tongues, to work miracles and heal are the important gifts. It is easy to say that they are more important than the sharing of your lunch with a homeless man or giving to some world relief effort in Haiti. But we would be wrong. God has a different ordering of these things, and in his hierarchy of gifts, love comes out above them all. Paul will spend a great deal of time talking about that in chapter 13 and the preacher wants to be aware that this is the message for next week.*

*The body metaphor thus seems to present several possibilities to us. We could preach about the unified diversity of God's people. He loves the fact that we are all different and he wants it that way. It may sometimes be uncomfortable for us, but Paul encourages us to see that the same Spirit works inside all of us.*

*The preacher might also speak to the functionality of the different parts. The body is in fact stronger and better for the diversity. Uniformity is a monstrosity, like some great disembodied hand. We are better for our differences.*

*The preacher might also then speak of the healthy ordering of all the people of God. No, not everyone is called to be a preacher or a teacher or a janitor. But all those things need to be done and in this strange kingdom of God, he sees and values all of them. We may sometimes have a hard time seeing the beauty and value of all that, but he never does. Rejoice that he has seen and smiled upon the little kindness which you performed for the child who lives down the street or the co-worker who needed those words of encouragement which you gave.*

Luke 4:16-30

<sup>16</sup> And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

<sup>18</sup> "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,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup> And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph's son?” <sup>23</sup> And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” <sup>24</sup> And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. <sup>25</sup> But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, <sup>26</sup> and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. <sup>27</sup> And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” <sup>28</sup> When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. <sup>29</sup> And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. <sup>30</sup> But passing through their midst, he went away.

*This text really hangs on the whole book of Luke. Taken by itself it is just a strange little story, but in the context of the whole book it becomes much more. Luke is developing some things and laying groundwork for other things which are central themes to his whole book. The preacher who comes to this text will probably want to keep some big Lucan themes in mind.*

- 1. Concern for the little people: More than any other Gospel writer, he portrays Jesus as caring for the weak, the helpless, and the bottom rung sorts of people. Not that this theme is absent from the other Gospel writers, but Luke develops it more than anyone else.*
- 2. Issues of Authority: Luke establishes this in his announcement dialogues and even his introduction in which he states the various rulers and high priests, etc. Jesus lays claim to serious authority in this text. He is the one whom Isaiah was talking about. That takes more than a little chutzpa.*
- 3. The Work of the Holy Spirit: Luke, more than other Gospel writers, fills his portrait of Jesus with the Spirit. Notice the text that Jesus uses as the basis for his sermon. It starts with the “Spirit of the Lord is upon me...”*
- 4. The Serenity of Christ: Luke, unlike other Gospel writers, portrays Christ as serene, unflappable, and undisturbed by all that goes on. Even in the passion scenes at the end of the book, he does not highlight Jesus pain and suffering, but his calm and reassuring words spoken to the women who follow him, to the malefactor, etc. Here we will see*

*Jesus calmly walking through the hostile crowd. Other Gospels will speak of his hunger, thirst, anguish in the garden, etc.*

5. *Jesus the patterned pattern: Luke is careful to portray Jesus in continuity with the Old Testament. Here Jesus notes similarities with Elijah and Elisha, the two great prophets of I and II Kings. He is patterned after the OT prophets and leaders, but he is also the pattern which others follow. Jesus in being rejected is also foreshadowing the rejection of God's people.*
6. *Geography: Luke more than any other Gospel writer will make much of the geographic places. This is home for Jesus. This home/beginning is a paradigm for his ministry. This will be repeated on a larger and grander scale in Jerusalem, in the city where stands his "father's house." Jerusalem in turn will be the focal point of Acts as the message blossoms and explodes out of that city to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.*

*Looking at the specifics of this text in more detail, Jesus returns to his hometown. The very limited archaeological dig in Nazareth has revealed a small agricultural village of about 200 residents. It was a modest place, no large buildings, most of the homes were simple affairs whose back walls were formed by a hill. This work is hampered today by the fact that a thriving city of 60,000 is built on the place. The people who lived there probably worked in Sepphoris, the nearby town which Herod Antipas started building in 4 BC as his new capitol. Being a "tekton" or builder, it is likely that Joseph brought his family back here because there was work for him.*

*Luke records this event very early in the ministry of Jesus, but from the comments he makes, it appears that Jesus has been active in other places prior to this. Luke only gives a single verse to this element of his ministry immediately prior to this passage. It is clear that Luke sees something in this encounter which allows him to say something necessary about Jesus. Luke wants to kick off your experience of Jesus' ministry with this story.*

*But the story is strange. Jesus in the Sabbath gathering is given the scroll of Isaiah to read. He unrolls and finds the place in the book of Isaiah which he quotes, chapter 61. The Isaiah scroll is massive and this suggests a couple things in itself. One does not accidentally go that far. He is not randomly picking a verse, but he knows this verse and wants to speak to this verse.*

*His message is peculiar, but not at first offensive to the people. He tells them that today is the fulfillment of this prophecy. And all the people are amazed at the gracious words he speaks. If he was interested in their praise, he would have shut up right then. But he did not. He goes on to suggest that they are all waiting for him to do some miracle as he has done elsewhere. But Jesus tells them that they will reject him, no prophet is honored in his home town.*

*He goes on to use two illustrations from the Old Testament: The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, and Elisha healing the Syrian captain, Naaman. The point of both of these accounts from I and II Kings is that the people whom the prophets helped were not Jews, but at the same*

*time Jesus notices that there were many starving Jewish widows and Jewish lepers who were not thus saved.*

*This does not go over well. They grow angry and would take him outside to throw him off the cliff, but he calmly walks through them and nothing comes of this. Notice the reactions of the people to Jesus, there are strange tensions here. They love him and hate him at the same time. Luke will make much of this that Jesus is essentially killed for being a good man, he heals the sick, befriends the lonely, raises the dead, cares for the weak, and so they kill him. It doesn't make sense, he speaks the truth and it is the occasion of his death.*

*But even stranger, Jesus does not always avoid this death, even though he could. In fact, the death becomes the mechanism for the salvation of the whole world. Luke is telling us right now that Jesus is no victim of the Romans. He is the willing master of these events. The fact that Jesus walks away this time but not that Friday we call Good tells us something. He could have walked away that day too, but he chose not to do that. Jesus is not the victim here but the one who takes action in his own death. But we also can say that the very rejection of the Son of God is instrumental in God's loving plan for the sinful world. Perhaps the greatest crime ever committed, the unjust execution of the only holy, righteous man who ever lived, becomes the very mechanism of the rebellious world's rescue. An act of rebellion is the rebellion's undoing! This is a strange and powerful mystery and Luke is introducing us to this mechanism here. Jesus' rejection in his hometown for speaking the truth will be repeated in Jerusalem, necessarily so.*

*The preacher will have a challenge in this today. How does one make this completely familiar message shocking to his audience? Or does he want to rejoice in the familiarity, that we have become so familiar with God that we are no longer shocked by his strange methods? Is that complacency or one step closer to heaven?*

## **Law**

1. The news seems to carry nothing but an unending litany of disasters, horrors, and crimes. Whether it is the microscale of a single human life or the disasters on a national scale like what happened in Haiti's earthquake, Syrian civil war, or just open the newspaper for the calamity d' jour.
2. I wish that God would busy and do something about all of this. The prayer today urges him to and I wonder what is the delay.
3. I wish he would especially take care of the little people on the bottom of the heap. Where is the good news which Jesus speaks of "for the poor." I feel somewhat smug about this desire, realizing that this puts me on the proper side of the equation, but in truth I don't see much actually happening. But the mandate to love those people terrifies me.

4. There is much in this I do not understand. I look at the disaster of the day and I find that Jesus is there, but he is not present with angelic workers doing the heavy lifting and digging the folks out of the rubble of some earthquake or stopping up the guns of the oppressors. Instead, I tend to see him bleeding on the streets, suffering, hungry, and identifying with the very lowest of the low.

## **Gospel**

1. Not one sparrow falls to the ground but that God knows it. Luke reminds us that God has a tender spot for the poor, the weak, and the lowly. Not one of the victims of this earthquake died without God knowing it, grieving it, and sending his Son Christ to do something about it. Not one of the people who died in whatever disaster has our attention at the moment will be absent on the day of resurrection.
2. God's ways are indeed mysterious to me, and I wish, in my weakest moments that he would just listen to me and do it my way, but thank God that is a prayer to which he gives a resounding "No." I may not understand the ways of God, nor the role of some tragedy, but I can commend myself and my family and this whole world to his loving hands and know that we are far safer there than anywhere else. His love is not always what I want, but it is always what I need.
3. God has a heart for the suffering of God's people and he has hands for them too: My hands. He has united us into one body and when one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts. Stepping into the world of God's love is neither easy nor safe. He can be very hard on the spirit filled servants, but he also offers tremendous blessings to us. Martyrs give unto death, and wear crowns in the hereafter.
4. But he asks nothing of me that he himself has not already given. Strangely the crushing of my hopes for him is exactly what needed to happen. He has come to find me, not in my success, but in my days of deepest and darkest failure. The pattern of Jesus life is that in losing he wins me, in dying he restores my life, in being crushed, he becomes my savior. The hope of the world is not my hope, but his.

## **Sermon Ideas**

1. My God is a Loser! (That the Spirit of God would disabuse the hearer of his or her expectations for the actions of God, and cause us to embrace the cross, the mechanism of God's salvation via a road of humility, rejection, and death. Not only is the cross God's way of saving me, it has become the way of my life as well!)



We are coming to one of the most important holidays in the secular year: Super Bowl Sunday. Like the Romans of old, we are a nation of winners and we like to be winners. But God will save the world through losing, losing his life, losing his dignity (crucified men were naked), and losing all his friends.

The picture on the left is an early bit of anti-Christian graffiti. The intent here is to make fun of the Christians. The words say something to effect of “Alexander worships his God.” Notice that the one crucified has a donkey’s head. The man who scratched this bit of graffiti was trying to mock this religion which worshiped a crucified lord. Who would do such a thing?

The title of the sermon is meant to be shocking, and you will have to determine if you are able to do that with your folks or not. It is not really worth a fight over this, but it might just get our people to see and think about the cross and crucifixion a little differently. Too often we have made it into something comfortable and normal. We wear a cross around our neck or on our lapel and it is simply a piece of jewelry. Remember that to the people of the first century that would have been positively offensive, like someone today wearing what? Perhaps another way to think about it would be if my daughter’s choir “The Tsunami” were to tour in Japan. Would they be offended by that group’s name? Are we so jaded that we cannot be shocked like this anymore? We have been desensitized to what is shocking. The news and the reality shows have done that to us. Just compare the portrayal of sexuality in the 50’s and 60’s compared to today.

Or perhaps we are too sensitive. Recent protests on college campuses have raised the idea of micro aggressions, seemingly innocuous words and phrases which cause offense in one community or group of people. Even the term “trigger warning” has been labeled a micro-aggression by a group of students who find any reference to a gun (trigger) just too much to handle. But are we offended by the really offensive things or have we so isolated ourselves from true aggression and offense that we find it now in the slightest of slights. We are not offended because we refuse to be offended by the ideas or the words of another. We see anything we disagree with as being an aggression perpetrated against us. We only listen to the right sorts of radio or television news programs which tell us what we want to hear and feed us a line of news with which we agree. We just cannot stand to hear what the other side says and we cannot bear the thought of considering their opinions. What if they are right?

The truth be told, the crucifixion needs to be shocking to us on more than one level. That is God on that cross – contrary to all my expectations and hopes for God. But there are also many ways to accomplish that and a title might not be the best way to do that. The idea of a loser, however, might be really helpful here. Like modern Americans, Romans

of the first century were winners. They had over 100 different words for “conquer a city.” Luke was portraying Jesus as a reject. The shock is that God would do this. Crucifixion was the way you killed a slave!

This sermon is based on the experience of Jesus in Nazareth in the Gospel reading for today. You may simply want to retell that story and point out some of the thematic issues in the text, and then leave the cross thing for the end of the story.

The folks were perfectly happy when Jesus came in and preached the first part of his sermon. The problem comes when Jesus rather challenges/baits them. He challenges their expectations. They don't even really seem to have read their OT very well. He challenges their conceptions and expectations of God.

The Law is that I expect a winner, but God shows up a loser, dying on a cross. The Gospel to this Law is, oddly enough, the very same event. Jesus, having challenged our expectations, replaces them with something really much better. He reaches out his mighty and beautiful hand, and we find it has a nail firmly planted in the middle of it. A nail which he willingly took to pay for my sins. Yes, my God is a loser, a loser for me!

One might also talk about the rejection of Jesus on the part of the Nazarenes— they don't get the mission at all. They want Jesus to be for them, not for those people. He says things they don't want to hear, which anger them. Thus they reject Jesus, God's Word, and His truth. They are stubborn. Do we sometimes want Jesus to save the right sort of people, the people just like us? Do we struggle to see him working in the midst of folks who are very different from us, who are perhaps intimidating or strange to us?

What is perhaps even more disturbing to us is that this can still be the mechanism of salvation. It is the rejection by his own people that becomes the very instrument of salvation itself. While the rejection on the part of people like those in Nazareth this day was bad, it also eventually was the very sort of thing that led to Jesus death for all the world. Saul's persecution of the church forced it out of Jerusalem and into the mission to which Jesus had called it in the beginning. Can the preacher point to our own failures to apprehend and love the kingdom of God as a mechanism for Jesus to bring his kingdom to unsuspecting places? Is our empty building proving to be a place where some ethnic minority is now finding a place to worship? Is that a gospel moment for us?

This is a hard text, and we as preachers really need those hard texts sometimes. Otherwise we will preach a theology of easy glory. This is a hard law/gospel portion of scripture.

Book Recommendation: “Loving Jesus” by Mark Allen Powell

2. The marvelous body of Christ (That the hearer would marvel at the church and the work which Christ does through the Spirit in his body, the Church. So different, yet we are united, so individual, yet all knit together into one church.)

This is based on the Epistle reading for today. The preacher may want only to hit one of these elements. The fact of the diversity might be just enough. The multiplication of ministry because we are different is the result of diversity and a more mature congregation may need that. Through it all, one needs to hold up for folks that the love of God for these people never wavers or changes, it does not grow or wane, it is not divisible nor multipliable, it simply is.

I would not recommend that you cast about for another metaphor here. We are a body. That is a powerful way to say it and I would use it. You don't need to use mosaics, stew pots, or any other useful or not useful metaphor to speak of this. Stick with Paul.

You may want to incorporate the Nehemiah text here, they all gather as one man, and they are sent home happy and rejoicing – despite the reality of what they are always experiencing. The LORD is caring for them – feeding the body with the Word. It is not a body in the sense of saying I am really a hand, but it is a body which gathers around the word of God, a body which is joyfully fed by his nourishment.

This sermon is very easy to preach the law and short shrift the Gospel. It is essential to remember that God is the creator of this body, he is the uniter as he has poured out His Holy Spirit in our individual lives. He unites us into this one body. This is not something at we can exhort people to do, it is a reality which he created in our baptism and in our life.

We might also want to point to the larger body of Christ – the fact that we are not just a little parish which is feeling lonely and not very successful. We are part of God's great work throughout this world. This month God will make more new Christians in the world than there are members of the LCMS. The LCMS is about one month's worth of new Christians in God's plan. That might make us feel small or it might make us glad to be part of a God who is doing amazing things out there.

3. They assembled as one man (OT: That the Holy Spirit of God would infuse our worship with reverence, piety, and Joy.)

This sermon sees the OT reading as a paradigm for our worship. The Law will be easy to see, where we do not look like this assembly in its attention to God's word, in our failures of piety and posture, in our failures to hear and internalize what it is said which ultimately robs us of the Joy that God has for us.

You may want to bring in the Epistle lesson with its Spirit infused congregation.



The Gospel will be harder to see, but I think it is found in the Gospel lesson. Jesus dies for these Nazarenes who reject him. The day comes when he does not pass through them unawares, but submits to their cruel intent. This time it was not to be thrown from a hill but to be led up a hill and nailed to a cross by Roman soldiers.

Jesus did not die for them because they got it right, he died for them because they had gotten it profoundly wrong. They had no hope of God's love as a response to their proper worship. Their worship and piety was the very problem which God had come to rescue them from. Likewise God is not loving us because we are in church today, but we are in church today because God has already loved us. He will not reject our songs and praise, tainted though they are by sin.

That said, now we can come back to the OT lesson and see it for another sort of Law. Now it is not the prescription of what we are supposed to be or else. Now it is the very description of what God is working in our midst. This becomes not the thing which we must do but the blessed goal to which God is leading us, a relationship in which we hear and love him with our whole heart, mind, and soul. Again, the last words of the psalm might be a great place to go with this.