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Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 4:21-30

Who is Jesus? One Whose Authority is Questioned

Last week we left Jesus in what turns out to be the middle of a story. Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth after traveling around Galilee teaching and healing. He had been on the receiving end of a lot of positive attention from the crowds. Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. I shared last week the words from a scholar who described the situation this way: “The passage [Jesus] just read, he explains, shouldn’t be heard only as the words of Isaiah long ago and far away. They should also be heard as Jesus’ own words here and now, applying to him directly, right before their eyes. It’s as if he says: *The Spirit of God is upon me, sitting here with you, right here, right now. God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. And that Great Jubilee you’ve heard about, that long-awaited year of the Lord’s favor? I’m here to tell you: it’s begun! Today — today, in your hearing! — this scripture has been fulfilled!*”¹

I gave you a head’s up last week, that while it sounds like we have finished the story – after all Jesus says that the “scripture has been fulfilled” - there is actually more to this story, as we hear now from the Gospel of Luke 4:21-30.

Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” Jesus said to them, “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 his 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 with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

¹Salt Project. Jubilee! SALT’s Commentary for Epiphany 3 (Year C): Luke 4:14-21. January 21, 2025. Online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/23/jubilee-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-three>

We have all been there at some point in our lives when a comment made seems on the surface like a compliment, and yet you have a nagging suspicion it wasn't quite made that way. We call these backhanded compliments. In my quest to learn a little about how artificial intelligence might be used in the church, I asked an AI program to generate some examples of backhanded compliments and this what popped up – along with helpful explanations²:

"You clean up nice": This statement may imply that someone usually looks messy.

"You look great for your age"

"You handled that project surprisingly well for a beginner":

"All spoke well of Jesus and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" Well, actually this was not in the list, but it could have been if we follow Jesus' reaction to the question.

Is this not Joseph's son? We know this guy... his dad was a talented carpenter and mason. And we hear he is pretty smart – really knows his way around scripture. And a good speaker and teacher. And yes, we have heard the conversation around town that he has been healing people and performing miracles. But really – fulfilling the scripture of the prophet Isaiah that he – Jesus of Nazareth - is the one who has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. Well, that is taking things a little far.

Jesus "hears" the underlying message they are sending to him. It is not a message of pride in the hometown boy, rather it is an accusation that Jesus doesn't have the authority to make this claim. He is not a rabbi or a priest – not even from the lineage of a priest – he is a son of Joseph, not a son of Aaron. And the chess game begins. Jesus counters with what he supposes they are thinking: we have heard the claims of the healings you have done in other towns – why have you not done those healings here? We should be getting the good stuff – the healings and the miracles and all the pretty shiny trappings. After all you are "one of us."

And Jesus moves his queen, and gives a lengthy response about how those considered to be "others" or "on the outside" have been healed through the gift of God's grace. And this is the crux of the issue... who exactly is God's grace for? Jesus chose to share two stories of how the prophets Elijah and Elisha not only cared for the Hebrew people they were called to serve, they also cared for those outside the sphere: feeding of the widow at Zarephath in Sidon (outside of the Hebrew nation) and the healing of Naaman the Syrian.

Those in the synagogue hearing Jesus words fall prey to either/or zero sum thinking. Why feed **that** widow in a foreign land? Why heal **that** man who is not even from our nation? Jesus rejects this kind of thinking, embracing a story of "both/and". Jesus shares a story of welcome, inclusion and justice that will repeat throughout his ministry. It is a story that will be repeated by the apostle Paul and the disciples as the church grows beyond Jerusalem. It is a story of welcome, inclusion and justice that we still need to share today. And it is a story that was met by anger from those who heard Jesus' words.

² Google Generative AI

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

And sadly this story is too often still met with anger today. Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde may not have been literally led to the brow of the hill to be thrown off a cliff, but she was certainly driven to a metaphorical hill by those who heard her preach the Gospel words of welcome, inclusion and justice.

This story of welcome, inclusion and justice was also seen in the Old Testament passage Jeff read of the calling of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was called to serve in a difficult time. The Hebrew nation was a pawn between battling superpowers. The leaders were failing to rely on God, instead putting their trust in alliances with shady and duplicitous rulers of the region. The people were expecting and needing a prophet with experience, with the right credentials, one who “looked like a prophet should look.” And yet God called Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, despite his youth. Jeremiah countered God’s call saying: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

The Lord was having none of that and said back to Jeremiah, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’ for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” And Jeremiah spoke up and spoke out, delivering God’s word to the people.

So did Jarena Lee. Jarena Lee, born in 1783 and In 1807 she was baptized as a Christian after hearing the preaching of the Rev. Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the first independent Black denomination in the United States.

Much like Jeremiah, Jarena Lee was called by God to the deliver the Word. In her autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, Lee shares

Between four and five years after my sanctification, on a certain time, an impressive silence fell upon me, and I stood as if someone was about to speak to me, yet I had no such thought in my heart. But to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, "Go preach the Gospel!" I immediately replied aloud, "No one will believe me." Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say, "Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends."³

Lee shares that at first she thought the Satan had spoken to her, but after much prayer, she realized it was the voice of God. Two days after this revelation, Lee went to see the Rev.

³ “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee (1836),” in *American Religions: A Documentary History*. 198-213; 2007.

Allen, the preacher in charge of the African Society, to tell him that she felt it was her duty to preach the gospel. Allen rejected the request since their church did not allow for women preachers. In an impassioned speech, Lee proclaimed “If a man may preach, because the Saviour died for him why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one ...?”

Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one ...? Indeed. Jarena Lee’s question resonates with me. Much as the question I shared last week from theologian Kelly Brown Douglas “What does it mean to be Christian in this time?”

Who has the authority to speak on behalf of God? Jeremiah questions whether he is too young to be an authority who will be listened to. Jarena Lee is surprised that God is calling her, a young, Black woman, to preach. The crowds in the synagogue question Jesus’ authority, as he is simply just the son of Joseph of Nazareth. In their rage, the mob tries to silence Jesus by throwing him off a cliff. But scripture tells us, Jesus, passed through the midst of them and went on his way. He didn’t respond back to raging crowd with anger or bitter words. He didn’t retreat and isolate himself, doomscrolling on the internet all day. No, he kept going and as we will hear next week, he called disciples to join him in his ministry.

These weren’t the last angry crowds Jesus would face. It wouldn’t be the last time Jeremiah questioned his role as a prophet. And Jarena Lee faced many obstacles to having her words as a preacher heard. There were costs for their actions, risks each of them had to take. Jeremiah’s prophecies prompted plots against him. He was beaten, jailed and threatened with death. He was released by Babylonian officials during the exile of the Hebrews and he fled to Egypt to spend the rest of his life there in exile, while continuing to seek bring the Hebrew people back to their God.

It took many years before Jarena Lee was able to preach in a church service, only when the preacher of the day fell ill did she preach. And while she was not officially able to preach in the AME denomination, Lee went on to become a traveling preacher throughout the US, including in the South, where she risked enslavement. In 1852, the AME Church officially ruled that women were not allowed to preach. Following this decision, Lee disappeared from the historical record

Who is Jesus? He is one whose authority is questioned and yet he didn’t let that stop his ministry of welcome, inclusion, and justice. He was a whole savior, a savior for all of the people, not a savior for just some, to paraphrase Jarena Lee. And he calls us to minister and serve in the same way – to be voices of welcome, inclusion and justice for all people. Who is Jesus? He is one who taught us to take risks. He taught us that sometimes God’s call of love and grace for all is met with anger. Yet we share it anyway. Jesus taught us to shake it off and keep doing the hard work. Who is Jesus? He is the one who gave us the gift of the Table to be nourished and renewed for this work. Amen.