

Beginnings and Endings  
Luke 4  
January 19th, 2020  
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Pastor Lauren and I are in the midst of a series on “Anchor Passages.” We will be preaching through some scriptures that inform our understanding of the church and our mission, and shape how we live our faith from day to day. I hope that these passages will be helpful. I know these passages will be anchoring me going forward.

Last week, we read from the 2nd chapter of Acts, and we caught a glimpse of the life of the early church. They were spending time together. That time together had rescuing power, and time together was needed to ignite what became the Christian movement. The church will always be community. We will always be spending time together. It’s how we practice our faith.

Today’s passage from Luke 4 points outward. It gives us the heart of the Christian vision. It tells us what the church should be up to in the world. It tells us who we should be together and how we should be as Christ’s body. And it’s challenging and beautiful.

I want to talk about this challenge for a little bit. Recently, I re-read Martin Luther King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail. He traveled to Birmingham after being invited to participate in a non-violent direct action program protesting segregation, and he was jailed because of it. A handful of church leaders published a statement criticizing him as an “outsider coming in,” encouraging him to be patient, and to change his tactics of direct action because they caused too much tension. He responds with a letter written from the Birmingham jail.

In the letter King says many things, including “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” King also talks about tension. He criticizes so called “moderates” who are more devoted to “order” than to “justice” and who prefer a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice. He continues, “Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out into the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up...”

King is saying that intentionally creating tension is needed to heal injustice in a society. Nothing will change unless there's tension. This sounds like a direct challenge to Minnesota Nice. I don't like tension. I've learned that personal and professional growth for me will involve walking into the tension rather than away from it. That will always be part of my journey. The church doesn't like tension. We don't want to be uncomfortable.

Jesus, though, is fine with tension. He lives for it, creates it everywhere. He understands what King is talking about. Maybe King simply understood the gospels. We see this tension in our passage for today.

When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor told us to pay attention to beginnings and endings when reading the Bible.

The fourth chapter of Luke is the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. This is Jesus' launch party. What is he going to say? How is it going to go?

We have been told so much already. As Luke begins, before Jesus is born, Mary sings the Magnificat and sings about a child who will bring down the powerful from their thrones while lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. Then the Christ child is born to the lowly, in humble settings, (a manger in Bethlehem) and angels give him all the titles that Caesar has: Lord, Savior, Prince of Peace. Tension is building already. We know it as the reader. We can feel it, but the world doesn't know it yet.

As an adult, Jesus is baptized in the river Jordan and the Spirit descends upon him. We as the reader see that the power of God is with him. He goes into the wilderness. He emerges ready to start his ministry. So, he goes to Nazareth, his hometown, to kick things off.

In Nazareth, he opens the scroll of Isaiah and says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me..." We saw that at the baptism. Anointing is what happens to kings.

Jesus continues, "to bring good news to the poor." That's it. That's what Jesus will be doing and that is what God is up to. This is what saving the world looks like. This is what Jesus will be doing. It will create tension. "Release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free," those statements are a deepening of the first one. Proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor is proclaiming Jubilee from Leviticus 25. It's a vision of debt forgiveness that happened every 50 years, and people would be restored to the land they had lost because they couldn't pay their debts. Some people, owners who have benefitted from

people defaulting on loans, and have acquired that land, aren't going to like this. But this is the kind of thing Jesus wants to do.

What do the people of Nazareth think, as Jesus is talking to them? They love it. They can't get enough of it. This is good news for them. There's no tension in this part of the story. There are no questions like, "is this even possible? is this too bold? How are you going to pay for it? Nothing like that. That's our tension in this time. There are no questions like that. Just people saying, "oh this Jesus is so well spoken, such a nice young man, we are so proud."

This is when Jesus should stop. If he had advisors with him, they would tell him to stop.

But Jesus doesn't know when to stop. Actually, Jesus knows when he needs to keep going. There's more healing that God needs to do. Jesus then speaks of Elijah going to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon, and Elisha going to Namaan the Syrian. Jesus is telling of God's saving activity going to the Gentiles. Gentile means "not a Jew," "other people," "someone who isn't like us." To be clear, Jesus isn't talking about God's saving activity going to those who are responsible for the oppression, those who are responsible for creating the poverty, those who hold the power (at least not without repentance). Jesus is still taking sides against all that is creating poverty and keeping people there. But, Jesus is saying that God is going to be for the poor everywhere. God is for the poor in Nazareth who worship God. God is for the poor who don't worship God and don't do things the way people are used to. God is not thinking small. God is thinking big.

It is at this point that the people of Nazareth get enraged. The tension is brought to the surface. The boil is uncovered. The people drive Jesus out of his kickoff event. Jesus doesn't get defensive. He doesn't backtrack or awkwardly apologize. The Spirit of God helps him walk through them to safety, and he goes on his way.

These are the two sides to the Christian vision, Jesus will keep talking about them as he goes about his ministry. I think of them as communion table values. Everyone is valued. Everyone is welcome. Everyone is a child of God, no matter what. No exceptions. There are no borders, there are no boundaries. And, everyone is fed. When the bread is broken and shared, there's enough for all.

The activity of Jesus is not just about naming these values. Jesus will be working to actively dismantle what keeps us from seeing ourselves in our neighbors, every neighbor. Jesus will be working to dismantle poverty and oppression and what keeps people poor. Only one caused tension in the story for today, but both will cause tension as the gospel continues. Jesus is living out what Martin Luther King understood, we will need to walk into this tension to heal it.

I feel like I saw this story from Luke playing itself out today. I've seen it in one place that saddened me and in one place that gave me hope.

I've been following the refugee resettlement story with a heavy heart, and I know many of you have too. President Trump issued an Executive Order allowing local officials to block refugee resettlement. A judge has since halted that executive order. Meanwhile though, states

and counties have been making these decisions. Our governor affirmed that Minnesota would remain a state welcome to refugees. Rice County Commissioners affirmed (not unanimously, but they did affirm) that Rice County would remain open to refugee resettlement. Beltrami county, though, made news nationally in voting not to allow refugee resettlement.

I read the Star Tribune article about the vote in Beltrami County, and I was so sad as I was reading it. 18% of Beltrami County lives in poverty. The county's budget has faced multimillion dollar shortfalls as foster care placements have risen dramatically. This is a county facing real needs that must be addressed. These are circumstances that shouldn't be occurring in a state with as much wealth as Minnesota. One County Commissioner said misinformation was rampant before the vote, including suggestions that the county was going to bring in large numbers of Muslims and Syrian refugees who would overwhelm county and school district resources. But instead of anger being directed at a whole economic system that isn't working for them (the first part of our story from Luke), the anger is directed unnecessarily towards the newcomer, those who look different, who are different, and who also have significant need (the second part of our story from Luke).

The hopeful sight came on Wednesday night.

Wednesday night I was here for WFFF, and I saw people I knew and people I didn't filing into our church for an ISAIAH MN caucus training. Thousands of others across the state will be joining the effort too, seeking to bring our faith values into our politics. Compassion: we should see ourselves in one another, and care for one another. Abundance: in God's world, when bread is broken and shared there's enough for all. Everyone should have what they need.

Inclusivity: we are all children of God with value and should be treated that way. All across the state, Christians, Muslims, and others are gathering for these trainings, to be faith delegates. The goal is 5000 across the state and 10,000 climate delegates will be joining the effort too.

This created some tension in 2018 and it is going to create more tension in our state in 2020. We want real change and healing. We also know these are pivotal years for our state, nation, and world. The time is now. The question will be asked: should people of faith be involved in politics? My answer is oh my goodness yes. My answer here is that the separation of church and state is not about keeping people of faith separated from politics, but about making and keeping space for religious pluralism. We should notice though that this question comes up for the church when we are creating tension.. Should Muslims be involved in politics. My answer is ‘oh my goodness, yes.” They need to create a state and nation where they can thrive instead of just trying to survive.

Confronting the powers that be with these values will create tension. But, King teaches us that nothing will be healed without tension rising to the surface. Jesus will keep leading us into that tension again and again, and he will remind us that engaging this tension in the world is as much a part of being the church as being in a relationship and spending time together as a community.

For a world and a people in need of healing in this pivotal time, this agitating action of Jesus in the midst of the church, is good news.

Amen.