

Worship-at-home

January 23, 2022

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

God's grace is for whom?!



Call to worship: Psalm 124:8

Hymn: #118 “Hark the glad sound”
(First-Plymouth Church, Lincoln, Nebraska)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWagRaw9Kes&t=1s>

Prayers of Praise, Confession, and Supplication:¹

Creator, Christ and Spirit;
You are the maker of a better world.
You are the creator of lasting peace.
We worship you for the gifts of peace and healing that
You bring into troubled lives.
You have shown us the way to work for justice,
to love friend and enemy alike,
to build a better world.
In this time of worship,
inspire us to believe our work in your name makes a difference.
So may we live to bring glory to you through our commitment to you
and the communion we share with so many around world
as your faithful disciples.

¹ Adapted from worship resource for January 23, 2022 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

God of grace and unity,
we confess we can be divisive when you have called us to unity,
quarrelsome when you call us to seek peace, and
critical rather than caring.
We have grown used to our own ways
and cannot imagine you would ask us to change
even for the sake of the Gospel.
Forgive us when we mistake our familiar traditions for your truth.
Show us how we can witness to your love
through working and worshipping together.

Assurance of Pardon:

And give thanks to the Lord,
for He is good;
his love endures forever.

Hymn: #350 “To God be the glory”
(Roar VBS)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YodQbfbSWoQ>

The Word of God:

God's grace is for whom?!

We've come now to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He's been baptized, he's faced the devil, he (and we) has been assured of who he is and whose he is, and now he begins his life's work. And he began, as many Christians do now, in the synagogue. In the company of the gathered faithful worshipers.

*Power Point slide 1

READ LUKE 4:14-30.

1. When one reads this passage, it's worth noting the change in the mood of the synagogue.

vv. 15 "He began to teach ... and was praised by *everyone*."

vv. 22 "*All* spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

When Jesus first returned to his hometown, he was lauded by everyone:

"What a fine man Joseph's son has become!"

"What wisdom he's developed!"

"What a depth of spirituality!"

"How fortunate we are that he is one of us!"

"Now that he's home, we will see miracles happen!"

People often talk of a pastor's "honeymoon" phase. The early years when the pastor first begins work in a congregation. Everyone's excited and hopeful. Fresh eyes, fresh ideas, fresh energy. Although rarely spoken, there's often an underlying hope that this pastor will save the church!

Jesus' honeymoon phase was rather short-lived. Before the end of his service of induction, the mood in the synagogue had changed drastically:

vv. 28 "When they heard this, *all* in the synagogue were filled with rage."

vv. 29 "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."

Jesus went from receiving universal praise to receiving murderous hatred in the time it took him to deliver one sermon.

After proclaiming that the Isaiah scripture had then been fulfilled by his own arrival, Jesus reminded the worshipers in the synagogue of two particular events from their history to illustrate the effect his ministry would have.

The first is recorded in 1st Kings 17:8-16.

***Power Point slide 2ff.**

There had been a drought throughout the land of Israel and the surrounding territories. And with it came a famine. Zarephath was a town in the northern region of Phoenicia. It was not Israelite territory. The citizens were not part of the covenanted community. They worshipped Ba'al rather than Yahweh. And yet, the God of Israel sent his prophet Elijah to a starving widow in this heartland of Ba'al worship and saved both her life and that of her son's.

The second event is recorded in 2nd Kings 5:1-14 and it involves Elijah's successor Elisha. There was an Syrian named Naaman who was a commander in the Aramean army suffered from leprosy. After a raid on Israel, the Arameans took an Israelite girl captive. She told Naaman about a prophet of Yahweh's who could cure him of his leprosy. Naaman went to Elisha in Samaria. The God of Israel, speaking through Elisha, directed him to then wash in the Jordan River. He did, and was healed.

In both these stories we see the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sending his holy prophets outside of the territories of the holy nation – or else welcoming an outsider in – to help those who were not part of the covenanted community. He sent them to outsiders, to worshippers of Ba'al, to political enemies.

By evoking these stories from Israel's memory, Jesus brought home the point that the grace of the Lord God – which he had been anointed to bring – is not to be hoarded within the ranks of the gathered and established covenanted community.

Hence the epiphany of Jesus' inaugural sermon:

Jesus came not only for his hometown, but for everyone.

So, "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

2. During this season of Epiphany, we're trying to answer the question: What do these episodes of Jesus' life mean for me – and us – today?

In this episode, Luke has recorded Jesus' own proclamation of why he left the glories of heaven to dwell among us mortal beings in the first place. He came to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. And to do so not only for the gathered community of the faithful, but for everyone.

Because Christians, enlivened and instructed by the Holy Spirit, form the representative body of Christ on earth, this episode of Jesus' life speaks also of the purpose of Christian ministry and the purpose of the Christian church.

The church exists not only for its members, but, in the name of Christ, for those who may never darken the door of the sanctuary.

I think one of the struggles many Christian congregations are having in finding our place in today's society is that it can be difficult for those of us who are well-established church-goers to conceive of the gospel apart from the gathered Sunday morning community. Receiving the grace of Jesus Christ becomes almost synonymous with being an active member of a Christian congregation.

Such a mindset is rarely explicitly expressed, but it does appear in conversations. Talk of evangelism and mission often translates to strategies of recruitment. Outreach only becomes worth our effort (and expense!) if we can have some assurance that people will then become members. The unspoken mission statement is: "To know God, join the church." After all, for those of us who grew up in the church that is the way it has been – we go to church to meet God.

Now, I don't want to be misunderstood.

What we call "church," which is the community of Christians who gather at a specific time and place for worship (whether that place is physical or online) is of paramount importance. Church is when Christians can pray with and for each other. It's when we learn, connect, are encouraged, cry, are assured, and are sent out in the name of Christ to face another week. When the local church is focused and energized it

can do much good in the community: provide meeting space for healing groups (A.A./N.A) and youth organizations (Guides/Scouts), offer food banks and frozen meals, provide shelter and even free transportation and money.

What I am saying, and I think what Jesus was saying does not undermine the importance of the established, gathered, worshipping community. It does, however, add another dimension to what it means to be a Christian and, more to the point, what His life means to our daily ministry and mission.

3. What Jesus was trying to impress upon the faithful members of the synagogue is that the grace of God is not to be hoarded within the ranks of the gathered and established community.

Jesus came to reverse the effects of sin and give abundant life.

For everyone.

4. Most of us would probably agree with that statement. But I want to suggest that we lose our momentum, because we're not clear, in the privacy of our own minds, about what the good news of Jesus Christ is nor how it is still good news on the other side of the gathered community.

When we think about going beyond the boundaries of the church to spread the gospel, we lose our confidence because we're not sure how Jesus can actually help. We know he can. Maybe we've experienced his help ourselves. But we struggle to articulate that experience outside of the structures of organized worship, Bible study, and after-church coffee.

We might be able to talk about the virgin birth and the covenant, the resurrection and the Holy Spirit, sin, the cross, and forgiveness; about hymns and prayers, choirs and robes. But most people are not likely to engage with you in a conversation about these theological truths in a casual encounter. They're much more likely, like Naaman, to talk about their health. Or, like the widow at Zarephath, about their struggle to feed their family. Or, about how they wish the pandemic would end. Or, about how they don't know what to do about their kids, or about how dreadfully cold it is, or about how it's not cold enough.

It behooves Christians to clarify, in the privacy of our own minds, what the life of Jesus means in these quotidian struggles.

What does it mean that Jesus brings good news to the poor?

What does it mean that he proclaims release to the captives?

What does it mean that he gives recovery of sight to the blind?

There was an article in the December 2021 edition of the *Christian Courier* newspaper about successful ministry in small churches. The article quotes Pastor Marg Rekman of the Bethlehem Christian Reformed Church in Thunder Bay:

*Most churches are seeing that counting on children to carry on the church isn't a reality anymore. Now the onus is to do what the church has always been called to do – pray and go out to the harvest, invite others in – **with the motivation of spreading the gospel**, not 'saving' the church.²*

Jesus came to save all people. Not only those whose faces appear on the Zoom screen on Sunday morning or who polish the pews in the sanctuary.

I think if we were clear in our minds about what this means, we'd have the confidence to graciously speak and act in ways that would assure others – even in the midst of pandemics, supply shortages, or unruly babies – that in, by, and through Jesus we are in the year of the Lord's favour – yet to be completed but begun nonetheless.

If we could clarify these questions in our own minds, we'd be less concerned with the survival of the church and more confident to spread the gospel simply because it is good news.

I want to encourage each of us to think about your life, your experiences, those of people you know and connect the dots to trace how the Messiah's grace has strengthened, re-visioned, directed, and saved you in the past. Place those experiences and your developing 'map of grace' alongside the stories of scripture. Yield to the illumination of the Holy Spirit. And try to answer the questions:

How does Jesus bring good news to the poor?

How does he release captives?

How does he give recovery of sight to the blind?

² https://www.christiancourier.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/21December_web-1.pdf

Hymn: “I am the light of the world”
(Judy Armstrong and Marilyn Shaw)

Prayers of Intercession and Thanksgiving:³

God of life, God of love.

You created us and set us in relationship with each other:

In families and neighbourhoods,
in churches and communities,
in cultures and nations.

We give you thanks for the rich gifts of arts and culture,
of home life and community celebration
which bring meaning and encouragement to our lives.

Help us contribute our gifts
to the traditions and imagination that sustain the best of our common life
from one generation to the next.

God of mercy and forgiveness,

You call us to live together in peace and unity.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian unity,
we pray that your Spirit will create understanding and co-operation
among all who bear Christ’s name.

Help us share our gifts with each other
so that churches within our community may flourish
and our common mission will find new energy after months of challenge.
Lead us to reach out to those of other faiths and no faith
so that, together, we may be a blessing in the world you love.

God of healing and hope,

We pray for our neighbourhoods and our nation.

Where people are divided and bitterness turns into resentment,
show us how to work for reconciliation.

Inspire our leaders at every level of community life
to work together for the care of the most vulnerable
and to restore the goodness of our common life
as we recover from the effects of these months of pandemic.

Make us generous citizens and careful stewards
of the land you entrust to us together.

God of justice and mercy,

We pray for the world you love, the world Christ died to redeem,
so deeply divided by religious and political animosities,
by ancient bitterness and current conflict.

Encourage world leaders to work for peace and understanding,
especially in places torn by violence,
and areas still struggling with the effects of the pandemic,

³ From worship resources for January 23 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

by poverty, hunger and the effects of natural disasters.
May the hope Jesus embodies encourage us all to work for positive change.

God of courage and comfort,
We remember those of our congregation and community
in need of your special attention today....

Keep a silence for 30 seconds, and/or name people and local concerns.

Use us as agents of your healing and hope
as we offer ourselves in Jesus' name in the words he taught us to pray

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction: