

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, January 30, 2022

“Jesus’ Coming Out”

A Sermon Based on Luke 4:1,14-30

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Luke 4:1,14-30 (NRSV) ~ ¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ... ¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³ He 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.’” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ 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; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers^[a] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Jesus was on his way home to Nazareth after an exhausting 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism. He finally was ready to begin the ministry that God was calling him to. Today let's take a trip back in time and space to imagine what it must have been like for the 30-year-old Jesus to walk through the gates of Nazareth that day, into the village where he had grown up with his mother Mary, his father Joseph (who many think died when Jesus was still young), his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, Judas, and his sisters (never named), grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, teachers, friends, the whole village who had helped raise him. We can only imagine how excited people must have been to see him since he had been away for a period of time. People rushed up to him, embraced him, wanted to hear how he is doing and any other news of the world he might share.

A stranger enters through the village gates right behind Jesus. He is a merchant, a Gentile, traveling down the Silk Road that leads through the region of Galilee, connecting the lands of the Mediterranean with the lands and culture of Central Asia and China. The stranger was hungry and decided to stop at the next village, which happened to be Nazareth. So as he walks through the village gates and sees the crowds gathering around the man he had been walking behind for the past few miles, he says to one of the locals "Who's that man?"

This local, who just happens to be the village gossip, says to the stranger: "That's Jesus. But come on over here where no one will hear us." Giving the stranger a drink of water, and finding a place for both of them to sit in the shade, he continues: "Well, we don't talk about this much, but Jesus actually is a bastard, an illegitimate child. People say that he really wasn't Joseph's son, but Joseph raised him as his own."

"Please tell me more!" the stranger said. "What do you mean that he wasn't really Joseph's son?"

The village gossip continued on with delight, excited to have a new audience: "Well this was thirty years ago. All we know is that when his mother Mary got pregnant, she was still only engaged to Joseph. She was only fourteen, but she could have been stoned to death. It wouldn't be the first time we'd seen it happen. We heard that Joseph thought of divorcing her. To me that means that the baby wasn't his. But then Joseph suddenly brought Mary to live with him as his wife. Rumor has it that an angel spoke to him in a dream and that was why he changed his mind. Before long Mary was huge with child. It looked like we would have to call the midwife any minute but then Mary and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem for the census.

But then they didn't come back to Nazareth as everyone expected. Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. More than a year passed. Joseph's carpentry store stood empty. Mary's family was worried sick about her. We thought they might be dead. Or in hiding. So many others were missing then. I know you're not from around here, but have you heard about those dark times? When King Herod was killing all the male babies because he actually was afraid one of them would become king in his place. Just another one of his crazy paranoid delusions. Gosh, he even killed one of his wives and two of his sons. But then we began to hear these strange stories about Mary and Joseph. That right after they got to Bethlehem for the census, they had a baby boy whom they named Jesus. That there was something unusual and miraculous about his birth. Shepherds rushed out to tell people that this baby was sent by God. There were sightings of angels. A bright star.

And then we heard this really bizarre story that when Jesus was 40 days old and his parents had brought him to be presented before the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem, this old man named Simeon felt the Holy Spirit prompting him to go to the Temple too. He actually believed that during his lifetime he would see the Messiah we have been waiting for these past 400 years. Apparently when Simeon saw the baby Jesus, he rushed over and took Jesus from his parents and began praising God, breaking out in song, even dancing a bit, as he rocked the baby in his arms. We heard that the words of his song went like this:

***“Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,
30 because my eyes have seen your salvation.
31 You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.
32 It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and a glory for your people Israel.”*** (NRSV, Luke 2:29-32)

“Wow!” said the stranger. “So this old guy Simeon actually believed Jesus was the one your people have been waiting for all those generations! But I'm confused because Simeon seems to be saying that the Messiah is not just for your tribe, you chosen people, to be *“a glory for your people Israel”*? But it seems that Simeon also is saying that Jesus is a *‘light for revelation to the Gentiles’*? Outsiders. Foreigners. People like me. He couldn't really have meant that, could he?”

“Well,” the village gossip continued. “We have wondered about that too. But first let me finish the story about that day when Jesus was presented at the Temple. After Simeon sang that song while rocking the baby Jesus, he turned and blessed Mary and Joseph and then actually said something really upsetting to his mother Mary:

“[Mary] Many Jews will fall and many will rise because of this boy. He will be a sign from God that some will not accept. ³⁵ So the secret thoughts of many will be made known. And the things that happen will be painful for you—like a sword cutting through your heart.” (ERV, Lk 2:34-35)

But there’s even more to the story. Right after he said this to Mary, an elderly widow named Anna, who never ever left the Temple and was seen to be a prophet, a wisdom, a seer, one whom people believed saw and understood things not known by mortals, started loudly praising God and telling everyone that what Simeon said was true. Word spread like wildfire and before long got back to us here in Nazareth. So when Mary and Joseph finally returned to Nazareth after hiding out from Herod in Egypt for a few years where they were refugees, we all watched and wondered.”

“Was this child special?” the stranger asked.

The village gossip continued: “He appeared to us just to be just a normal kid, working in his father’s carpenter’s shop, helping his mother and younger siblings, playing with his friends, going to synagogue, talking to the travelers who would stop at our village to get their wooden yokes fixed for their ox or who wanted a meal. Thinking back, really the only thing that seemed a little strange was when he was 12 and we all had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival, he stayed behind in Jerusalem without even telling his parents. They were halfway back to Nazareth when they saw he was missing. They thought he was just walking with his friends as he had on the way there. They rushed back and spent three long days looking everywhere for him. Frantic. And you won’t believe where they finally found him! Most 12-year-old boys would be in the market. But of all places, they found him in the Temple discussing scripture with the religious teachers there, who were amazed by how smart he was. But truth be told, we have wondered about him all these years about him because of the rumors that reached us about what Simeon and Anna had said about him.”

“That’s quite a story,” laughed the stranger. “And I seriously doubt that you have to worry about any of it. I’m sure he isn’t the Messiah. He doesn’t look like one. Where’s his fancy clothing? His weapons? He doesn’t seem ready to take on the Roman army.

In fact, he looks pretty average to me. I mean have you heard about him doing anything special recently?"

"Well," the village gossip continued. "We do hear that he has become quite a teacher. Hopefully that's true because we sure could use a rabbi for our synagogue as the one with us now is getting so old. And there are some rumors that he did some healings in Capernaum. If these things are true, how lucky we are that he has come back to Nazareth! If his teaching is great, maybe people from other places will come and live here. We can build up our synagogue. We won't have to worry about our finances. Maybe we can attract some new members. And if he is a healer then people will hear about him, come to see him here in our synagogue, and we will all become famous along with him. That's what we all are hoping for!"

"But what about the prophecy to Jesus' mother about Jesus causing division and opposition? What about Simeon saying that he would break her heart because such painful things would happen? Aren't you worried about that?" the strange asked.

"Not really" said the village gossip. "How could he say anything that could cause division? Jesus of Nazareth is one of us. He loves us! He'd do anything for us to make our lives better. After all, he prefers us over everyone or else he would not be here today."

The stranger and the village gossip continued talking as they followed the crowd of people surrounding Jesus, who were walking to the synagogue for the Sabbath service of prayer, scripture, and preaching. In they entered. The synagogue already was packed. The scriptures say that among the townsfolk were Jesus' brothers James, Joseph, Simon, Judas, and his sisters, along with his mother Mary (Mt 13:55-56). The excitement was palpable. Jesus, who was becoming a famous teacher and healer, was now back in his home synagogue! He would teach them, tell them they were special, give them hope for their future, stabilize their community. Perhaps he would even heal some of them! They were so glad he was through with his travels and had returned home to his roots.

As part of the service, they asked Jesus if he would read something from the assigned scripture of the day. He said he would be happy to do so. They handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. It seemed that it took Jesus forever to find exactly the spot he wanted to read from. When he finally found it, he stood in front of the people as they waited with great expectation to hear what he had spent so much time looking for. Jesus read the following section from Isaiah (found in Isaiah 58:6 and Isaiah 61:1-2):

*¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Lk 4:18-19)*

And then, after reading this, in customary fashion, he rolled back up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. Everyone waited with bated breath to hear his commentary on it. His response contained just one single sentence: ***“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”*** (Lk 4:21).

At first the people’s reaction was one of pride and amazement. This Jesus whom they had trained to read from their sacred scriptures had just read so beautifully! His words were so filled with grace! The words of the prophet Isaiah just rolled like honey off his tongue. But wait! What was it he just said? The spirit of the Lord is upon him? And that he has been anointed and sent by God? Sent to do what? To get rid of the awful Roman occupying forces who were bleeding them to death with their new taxes? They sure hoped so. No, wait, he had been anointed and sent to bring good news to the poor, set free the captives and those who were oppressed, and to heal the blind. And wait, we like this part, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor! Yes, it’s time for a year of Jubilee when all debts are forgiven and enslaved people set free! But what’s this? Today, this very day, these things will be fulfilled! Yes, Jesus, please do these things for us! There are so many poor living within the gates of Nazareth. So many widows. There are so many in need of healing. So many blind, sick. Our prisons are filled with those the Romans have thrown in. Yes, Jesus do these things! You will bring fame to our village!

Similar to an inaugural speech or a State of the Union address, Jesus’ reading from Isaiah gives in a nutshell the content of his entire ministry. It contains his purpose statement, his *raison d’être*. That is why Luke sets this right at the beginning of his Gospel. To let the world know what Jesus’ ministry will be all about. And now comes the pregnant pause. The crowd begins to process what he has just said and what he hasn’t said. Favor turns to disfavor. Joy turns to shock. Disbelief builds in the mind. Judgment enters the heart. Wait! Jesus is saying that the Spirit of the Lord is upon HIM in a special way. That HE will fulfill these things that the prophet Isaiah talked about.

And then the elbowing and whispering began. “But he’s a bastard! Don’t our scriptures (Deut 23:2) tell us that those who are illegitimate aren’t allowed to take any leadership positions in our nation or synagogues?” And then they turn to each other, speaking so loudly that Jesus overhears what they are saying: **“Is not this Joseph’s son?”** (Lk 4:22) A mild version of this statement might be something like, “Well, considering he is a bastard, he isn’t doing so bad after all.”

The universe pauses to see how Jesus will respond to this perceived slight and insult. And those present that day were likely as shocked as we readers are today to hear his response, for it isn’t exactly gracious. He turns to the crowd, which included his mother, brothers, sisters, extended family, all those who had raised him, those who had observed him from close and afar, those who hoped that he would bring hope and healing to their village, and said three things in rapid succession:

“Doubtless you will quote me this proverb, ‘Doctor cure yourself!’” (Lk 4:23) This was a widely circulating saying at that time that might be interpreted in this context as “cure yourself of your illegitimacy, your own uncleanness.” Only then can you start to cure us.

Second, **“And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum’”** (Lk 4:23). Then after I’ve healed myself of my unworthiness, you want me to heal you? You expect me to do something for you like I have done for others not from here?

And third, **“And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown’** (Lk 4:24). With this statement, Jesus jolts them into an awareness of a new unsettling image of the God he is serving and the ministry he is being called by this God to undertake. It sure didn’t sound anything like the God they thought they were worshipping in which they were God’s favored ones, the chosen people. Jesus reminds them of that time in Israel’s history some 900 years earlier when King Ahab ruled with an iron fist with his Baal-worshipping wife Jezebel by his side. There was widespread famine and death. Why was it, Jesus asked, that even though there were widows all over Israel who were starving to death, the great prophet Elijah wasn’t sent by God to reach out to any widows in Israel but instead he went all the way to Lebanon where he provided food for and healed the son of the widow of Zarephath? (Lk 4:25-26; cf. I Kings 17). Or even though there were and are lepers all over Israel, God sent Elijah’s successor Elisha to heal the leper Namaan, who was the commander of the Syrian army, their dreaded enemies (Lk 4:27; cf. II Kings 5:1-19).

The crowds' response? The scripture's description of their response says it all: ***“all in the synagogue were filled with rage”*** (Lk 3:28). They realized that he was doing away with their identity as being God's chosen people. Jesus was telling them in no uncertain terms that God is so much more than their own tribal deity! That their table was too small. God was calling the world to a bigger table, one that included everyone: even the hated Lebanese and Syrians, who to this day continue to be enemies of Israel. They could not imagine God extending favor to those outside their circle. Jesus, ready to dismantle the status quo, was doing away with the binary thinking of us / them that energizes people by giving them false enemies. The human drive, after all, is to exclude. God's desire is to include. We have not changed much in the past two thousand years, have we? We still think that God belongs to us and that we have a better conception of God and know who belongs and who doesn't belong. Salvation, after all, is only possible through our community!

The seemingly friendly crowd who gathered at the synagogue to hear their hometown boy Jesus turned into a raging mob. The scriptures say 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”*** (Lk 3:29). They tried to kill him.

The stranger, alarmed, observed all this going on. Fearful that he might get caught up in it since he was a Gentile, he rushed out of the village gates. As he walked on down the Silk Road, he thought about what the village gossip had told him about Simeon's prophecy that this Jesus of Nazareth was not only going to be a glory for Israel but a ***“light for revelation to the Gentiles”***? To one like him? While he was pondering this, he suddenly noticed a man walking beside him. It was Jesus. How had he escaped the raging mob who had tried to kill him?

For the next three years this stranger followed Jesus, becoming a devoted disciple. He saw Jesus extending the vision he had given that day in his hometown synagogue of a God who was so much more merciful, generous, and bigger than anyone could ever imagine. This stranger followed Jesus for the next three years up until the very end when another raging mob called for his death, screaming out ***“Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”*** And at that moment he thought back to the raging mob who tried to throw Jesus off the side of a cliff in his hometown. Jesus' God, it seemed, had been too big for the villagers in Nazareth who had watched Jesus grow up. Jesus' God was too big for this crowd in Jerusalem too!

And when this Jesus whom he dearly loved took his final breath, the stranger broke down in tears as he looked over at Jesus' mother Mary and saw the words of Simeon's prophecy coming true before his very eyes that: *“Many Jews will fall and many will rise because of this boy. He will be a sign from God that some will not accept.”*³⁵ *So the secret thoughts of many will be made known. And the things that happen will be painful for you—like a sword cutting through your heart.”* (ERV, Lk 2:34-35)

Closing Prayer:

God, let us be open to the wideness of your mercy, the wildness of your expansive nature, and the greatness of your love for all the peoples of this earth. And let us always be ready to set a place to include one more at our table. In the name of your son Jesus, who brought this message to his home synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry, we pray. Amen.