

The Lord's Favor  
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 23, 2022

Please read:  
I Corinthians 12:12-31a  
Luke 4:14-21a

Worship is a way to remember the Lord's favor. And today, we have a few worship contexts to consider... First, Galilee: There must have been an exciting stirring in the synagogue that day when Jesus stood up and unrolled the Isaiah scroll to read. At last God has heard our cry and is going to do something, run out the Romans, set things right; "Good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners; proclaim the year of the LORD's favour!" Good news!

But then, reading further along, Jesus continues, "The last time God came for us, through the prophet Elijah, there were lots of hungry women in Israel during the famine. But God's prophet fed none of them, only a foreigner named Zarephath... And there were many sick people in Israel when the prophet Elisha came for us. But the prophet healed none of them. Only Naaman was healed. Naaman, a Syrian, a Syrian army officer..."

And the once adoring congregation was transformed into a murderous mob. So, they dragged Jesus out of the pulpit. That wasn't one of those "Great sermon!" Sundays for Jesus. It wasn't fun to be reminded that God was a big, living disruptive God who, having come to them before, was working with strangers and foreigners, and might be free to do so again. They experienced a Sabbath Scripture Subversion to their safe and secure spirituality and xenophobic patriotic religious nationalism! Jesus reveals his Kingdom is universal in its inclusivity, counter-cultural in its methodology, and immediate in its chronology.

Based on this narrative from Nazareth, I am reminded of the old saying about the job of a preacher: *To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable*. By coming to church, you risk the linguistic assault by the surprisingly scandalous Word of God.

So, consider as the Christians in Corinth sat in worship and heard what we just heard from Paul's letter to them. They were a people fairly regularly confused about what the Word meant for them as individuals and as a community... What if I were to stand here and tell you that each and every one of you were an essential part of the Church, that although we come from different backgrounds and political perspectives and don't always understand one another or have the same priorities, and don't even necessarily want to be seen together outside of this place.... that you need one another, that each of you are indispensable. That you can't say to one another, "I don't need you!" What if I tried to say to you that God has arranged things so that the inferior member gets the greater honor in this organization, that if one suffers, all suffer, that if one receives praise, we all rejoice? In a winner-take-all might-makes-right kind of world, this is counter-cultural at least, revolutionary at most.

Can you imagine the community first listening to the reading of Paul's letter. Picture a group of people like us (some sick and in Waveny Care, some in prison or detox, others struggling with

anger management, sexual confusion, marital strife, pornography, mourning the death of loved ones, battling cancer, career hardships, and pandemic burnout, among other things). They gather together listening to the intrusive Word of God, and then, something happens to them, something that happens whenever the Spirit moves upon us. The community is transformed into the Body of Christ, the holy catholic church, the communion of Saints, the household of God.

This time, they didn't try to kill the preacher. I imagine they wept as they heard the vision of who they were in Christ. I imagine some were cut to the heart in hearing the Word of God through the words of Paul. They were given hope again, at least a word of wisdom for how they could be again God's people, sharing their gifts to build up one another in love and go from a small, fragile ragtag group of fearful followers to the most impactful global organization in the history of the planet.

God's Word comes to us in the most amazing ways. One of the privileges I have had over the years is to work in international contexts. And so, part of my work has taken me to predominantly Muslim countries. What has fascinated me is a recurring theme in Muslim contexts: A number of brothers and sisters shared with me a similar story about how Jesus came to them in a dream. I am inclined to be sceptical when I hear about dreams. But this is how it goes. Jesus says, "You are my beloved... Do not be afraid... I will be with you always..." I've told them, "That sounds like Jesus!" These siblings are baptized, even though they know if they are forced to return home, they will likely be killed for converting to Christianity...

I would like to suggest to you that the Word of God is a solid basis for building or rebuilding our lives. But I might also say to you that the Word of God might *destroy your life as you know it!* We are told in this book "Happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord..." that the Word of the Lord never returns void... God's Word is a lamp for our steps and will light the way for us even in the darkness. We will be reminded that we are beloved of God, and that we have nothing to fear... *But we also read that God's Word will turn the world upside down!*

God's Word is like a two-edged sword... We need to hear that we have the Lord's favor, but we also need to hear that God's favor is for everyone! The Word disrupts and disturbs our comfortable spirituality: judge not, lest you be judged. Turn the other cheek. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Pick up your cross and follow me. As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me. Love the Lord your God with all you are and have. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Give freely, as you have received. I have come not to save the righteous, but sinners... Strange words for our world, no?

Sometimes the Word comes to us most powerfully through music. Today, Terry chose an offertory which you will hear in just a moment. We listened to it together last week and discovered some strange notes that made our heads turn. It was unexpected.

Edward Elgar, the composer of our offertory, set the gospel text in what I think is an intriguing, mysterious piece of choral music. Apparently, Elgar identified deeply with this text as he struggled with his own feelings of exclusion, social inferiority, and artistic insecurity. He struggled with

serious doubts about his own faith, so when Jesus declared he came to set the captives free he must have been inspired. But what I want you to notice are two dissonance chords you'll hear if you stay focused, once at the beginning and again at the end when the words "anointed me" are sung. The organ accompaniment has what almost sounds like a wrong note, but we believe it's designed to wake us up to something unexpected, something different...

Jesus would have had the same effect on the listeners in the synagogue that day in Capernaum. He stood up to read from the prophet Isaiah 61:1-2. What you probably don't realize is that Jesus left out a key part of the verse. He left out the bit about "the day of the vengeance of our God..." This is significant, as it shows a dramatic move from *retributive* justice to *restorative* justice in Jesus's vision for the Kingdom of God.

This is why Jesus would be criticized and ridiculed. It's why the power brokers of his day would plot and scheme to get him killed, to literally drag him to edge of a cliff in the hopes of throwing him away. Jesus very being was of peace, not revenge, of grace, not judgment, of non-violence, not war... And this just didn't fit into the "eye for an eye" red meat revenge nationalism of the patriotic zealots of the day.

The dissonant chords you will hear, Elgar says, signify Jesus as a "man of sorrows." This way of Jesus, the way of the suffering servant, is not an easy way, and it will seem strange, odd, out of place in this world.

That day in Nazareth, Luke says the peoples' joy turned to rage, at hearing the Word. They wanted to kill Jesus, and eventually did, for delivering an intrusive Word from a living, uncontrollable almighty loving God, a God brought near to us through thin little pages of print, and people with enough courage to receive it...

George Lindbeck of Yale has noted that the church overcame the Roman Empire in less than four hundred years, using none of the props by which Roman institutions constituted themselves. The Church was completely indifferent to family, gender, social, economic, religious, or political lines. The church formed a people on nothing more than the Word of self-giving love, that the Lord's favor is for everyone. The intrusive word plowed through Roman institutions and values, creating as if *ex nihilo* a new people where previously there had been none. A seismic shift occurred on the basis of nothing more than the Word of God.

Every time the scroll is unwrapped and the words, the gracious words, God's Word of favor, comes forth, the adventure begins, the Word of God has freedom to roam about in your life, and you are renewed, regenerated, redeemed, reformed, revolutionized, reconstituted, and repurposed as the People of God. And as God's Word has its way in you, the Kingdom of God is expanded and enlivened for all.

You'll remember when Jesus had been fasting for forty days, starving for lack of bread, Satan came and offered him free bread, all he wanted, if he would just bow down and worship him. And Jesus, so hungry he could die, said, "We don't live by bread, but by the Word of the Lord."

And this is the final point I wish to make. We can't just hear this Word of the Lord's Favor; we are called to live it. To eat it. To become it. To embody God's favor toward the world...

As we move through this season of Epiphany, it's worth hearing again Howard Thurman's poem "The Work of Christmas."

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.<sup>1</sup>*

Friends, today I invite you to feast again on the Living Word, the One who comes to you today with gracious, life changing, status quo quarrelling words. We live, and we build again our lives and our community, day by day, week by week, year by year, because of the gracious Living Word of God. Today, in the readings, the music, the offertory, the prayers, the singing, in the silence, *receive* and then go out into the world to live the good news of The Lord's Favor, and indeed, turn the world upside down...

*In the name of One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas," [The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations](#) (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1973), 23.