

Ushers hand out starwords to those who were not in worship last week.

Distribute cards and envelopes. Collect envelopes at end of sermon.

FOLLOWING THE EPIPHANY STAR

Luke 4: 14-30 Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside.¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read.¹⁷ The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,*
¹⁹ *and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

²⁰ He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him.²¹ He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

²² Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?"

²³ Then Jesus said to them, "Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum.'" ²⁴ He said, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown.²⁵ And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it didn't rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land.²⁶ Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon.²⁷ There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed."

²⁸ When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. ²⁹ They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.

Last week we remembered the Epiphany star followed by the Magi that first revealed that this baby who had been born to a poor couple in a backwater region in the Middle East had come to change all of human history, not just the history of the Jews. Jesus would change history for all people because God is God of all. Between that story and today's, 30 years approximately had passed. Jesus grew up and he was baptized in the Jordan river by his cousin, John. As Jesus rose out of the dirty Jordan river, "the Holy Spirit came upon him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." After that Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit where he lived for 40 days and nights without food. He was tempted to take use force to end his own hunger, to prove his power and to force God to save him. He resisted all temptations which prepared him for the hard work of teaching in the temple as we just heard.

Temptation comes in many forms. We all know the temptation to eat anything we can find when we're hungry. People who live with privilege as many Americans do know the temptation to 'fix' problems never considering the implications of what we're doing. Some of us may even have been tempted to 'force' God to save us from some brash act.

In resisting all those temptations, Jesus is prepared to face more subtle temptation, one that we're all familiar with: the temptation to put being liked ahead of

everything else. Another way to put it might be the temptation to ‘not rock the boat.’ To ‘Go along to get along.’ But Jesus does not succumb to that temptation. The one who was able to stand up to the greatest of all temptations preaches the shortest sermon ever. Three sentences that lay out Jesus’ mission statement for his entire ministry.

That isn’t the part that gets him in trouble, though. The congregation likes **that** part. It’s familiar. It’s Isaiah, a writer of their own tradition. It’s when Jesus gives **his interpretation** of what that means for those people sitting around him that he gets in trouble. While Jesus is reading from Isaiah the people love it, thinking it’s all about some day, by and by, somewhere in the sky, some undefined future heaven-like place in which *the poor will hear good news, the prisoners will be released, the oppressed will be liberated – THEN it will be the year of the Lord’s favor!*

They LOVE Jesus for that!

But, after the crowd praises Jesus, he says, in a sense, “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean you. The day of year of the Lord’s favor isn’t for you.” It’s when Jesus gets **specific**, when Jesus applies Isaiah’s words to their real, everyday life that they get angry. Because in Jesus example, the poor, oppressed, blind prisoners are foreigners! They’re not only from another country, they’re people who don’t worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph. They worship **foreign** Gods and yet God sent deliverance **to them**. God sent Elijah to save a poor widow in Sidon from starvation. God sent Elisha to heal the skin disease of a Syrian. These people who are healed are **not** people who ever heard the words of the Bible. They never attended synagogue. They most likely worshipped **foreign** gods, pagan gods. The crowds around Jesus became incensed at the thought that pagans would receive God’s favor, God’s blessings. And so they try to kill Jesus.

If you're reading *We Make the Road by Walking* as many of us are, you will have read McLaren's interpretation of this passage last week. He says if we want to understand the reaction of the crowd when they heard Jesus say this, we should, "imagine if a pope or a famous Protestant TV preacher today were to declare that God is just as devoted to Muslims, Hindus and atheists as to Christians. (The preacher) might not be thrown off a cliff, but one can easily imagine tense brows and grave voices advocating for them to be thrown out of office or taken off the air." Or removed from their position as pastor in a church.

But, that is what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying that God is God of all people; even all religions. God's love is for **everyone**. God rejects no one. People eject themselves from God's love by putting up barriers keeping other people out. Jesus is saying **he came** for the outsiders! It's been said, "every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it."

Christians want to claim Jesus as our own, but even Jesus didn't do that. Jesus' challenge then and **now** is to embrace the other, to pray for them, to advocate for them, to care for them and to love them. We **are the crowd**, eager to condemn others, to define ourselves by naming who we are against, maintaining the status quo for our own comfort. But, we do that at the risk of straying from Jesus who always embraced the other.

As we prepare to meet, as we do every year for our annual meeting to assess the past year and plan for the next, we can use this story to guide us into the future full of risk and challenge because that is where we will know Jesus is walking with us. We can follow Jesus into our contemporary "Gentile" territory offering help and

acceptance to the widows and lepers of the world. This can be our guiding mission statement for the coming year as we walk ever closer with Jesus.

During Epiphany we're following the Epiphany star, just as the magi did, into unknown territory. We're following not as the blind, but as disciples who study scripture, pray for God's guidance, live humbly serving our neighbors whoever they may be. The starword you received last week or this morning, may be a guide for your. Mine is "pathfinding" so I'm imagining how God is calling me to find the discipleship path in this year, in this world we live in.

As people following the star that leads us into the unknown, we are people of hope. The hopeless lie down and quit. God calls us always to have hope because we know the one in whom our hope lies. Our hope lies only in God.

So, to affirm our hope and discern where God is calling us to bring hope to a world that is often without hope, you are invited to write your hope for this coming year on the card you received. This hope should be something that you can be part of; something that you can help make happen or live towards. Remember that Jesus began his ministry not saying, I've come to pray for the poor, the blind and the oppressed. He said he came to bring sight, bring hope, bring liberation. As those walking with Jesus, we are called to pray for all those things, but we're also called to **do those things**, knowing that God will use our efforts done in humility to bring about more than we could ever do on our own.

Write your hope for this year, a tangible hope that can be measured, so when the year is over you can say, that hope was realized or it was not. A tangible hope that you can in some way participate in.

When you've done that, put it into the envelope. Write your name on it and pass it to the aisle to be collected by the ushers. Next January, we'll return these envelopes to you so you can reflect on how you have lived that hope, or tried to live it, how you tried to make that hope a reality with God's help.