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St. Paul's Episcopal Church (Cleveland, Ohio)  
4 Epiphany C (January 30, 2022)  
Luke 4:21-30

### **Finding Fullness of Life in the Middle of the Story**

Back when I lived in New York, my favorite night of the week to see a Broadway show was Tuesday. Because on Tuesdays, curtain was an hour earlier, at 7 instead of 8. Inevitably at these performances, a handful of ticket-holders who had forgotten about the earlier curtain would arrive an hour late – only to be ushered awkwardly to their seats in the dark. I always felt so badly for these late-comers. *How frustrating to try and make sense of a story when you have to begin in the middle?!*

This morning, we find ourselves in the same position as those tardy theater-goers, because our Gospel passage begins right in the middle of the story. Listen again to the first verse: “Jesus began to speak...Today *this scripture* has been fulfilled in your hearing.” What scripture, exactly, is Jesus referring to? In our day-to-day lives, this is a place we often find ourselves: in the middle of the story. Rarely do we have the benefit of knowing everything that came before, or seeing every situation through to the very end. But to help us this morning, I’m going to give a snapshot of what comes right before our passage begins...

Jesus has begun his ministry in Galilee and decides one day to visit to his hometown of Nazareth. By this point, he’s well on his way to becoming a famous teacher. On the Sabbath, as was his custom, Jesus visits the synagogue. During the service, he is handed a roll of scripture from the prophet Isaiah. He stands up in front of the entire assembly and reads them this passage:

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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

All the eyes in the synagogue are fixed on Jesus, hanging on his every word. Then comes the mic drop that begins today's passage: "Today," Jesus says, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The people's response is a mix of awe and bewilderment. They can hardly believe that the man speaking these words of grace is the Jesus they've known since he was a baby. They wonder: can the son of Joseph the carpenter really be the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation? Then the story takes a sudden and dramatic turn and ends with the citizens of Nazareth trying to hurl Jesus off a cliff. In the space of ten short verses, everything in this story falls apart. *Where did this visit go so horribly wrong? What did Jesus do to provoke such outrage?*

The short answer is: Jesus didn't give the people of Nazareth the story they wanted or expected. They were expecting him to dazzle them with miracles. They'd heard how Jesus had turned water into wine and made the lame to walk. If he'd done these things for complete strangers, surely he'd do much more for his own people, in his own hometown?! They thought...

But Jesus didn't do any miracles for the hometown crowd. Instead he cited stories from scripture. To these insiders who expected preferential treatment, Jesus responds with stories of God showing preferential treatment to outsiders. Stories about widows and lepers in foreign lands. Stories about people on the margins who received God's grace and favor. For the first 30 years of his story, Jesus had belonged to the people of Nazareth. But now he had been swept up into a new story. And this story – the one where he brought good news to the poor and proclaimed release to the captives – this story was going to take him far from home. But the people in the synagogue wanted the story where Jesus belonged to them. This new story he told them was threatening. It was not one they wanted to hear. So they lashed out, and tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.

It would be easy for us here today to judge the Nazarenes for their violent behavior. After all, if Jesus showed up here today to preach to us, we'd welcome him with open arms, right?

Or *perhaps*...we're more like the synagogue crowd than we'd like to admit. If we're honest, don't we often prefer to keep Jesus at home? To domesticate him into a version that doesn't threaten us? Don't we often prefer the comfortable, familiar story, over the one that challenges us?

The Gospel can be a hard story to hear when we're really listening. It demands something of us. It calls us to relinquish power and privilege...to give the outsider the seat of honor at the banquet table...to lose our lives in order to save them. There's nothing easy about that story.

The kingdom Jesus came to build – the one where the poor are lifted up, the hungry filled, and the rich sent away empty – for most of us here today, that kingdom is costly. And yet we, who find ourselves in the middle of this story, have committed to following the way of Jesus. We don't know exactly where that way will take us. But it calls us to leave the comfort of home. To follow Jesus into new territory. To see his image in the faces of those we wouldn't normally meet.

Just this past week, the St. Paul' Outreach Committee had a mini-retreat. We're working to re-engage ministries that had become dormant during the pandemic, and to identify new ways for St. Paul's to serve those on the margins. Our Loaves & Fishes feeding ministry is forging a new partnership with the Haven Home, a local shelter for women and children, so we can serve meals to members of this community. We are renewing our relationship with Greater Cleveland Habitat for Humanity, and will join other faith communities in a project called the Faith Build, to bring the dignity of affordable housing to those living on the margins of safety and comfort. We've re-launched our tutoring ministry at Roxboro Elementary to support students who have fallen behind, many because of systemic inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. Our EDWINS ministry is always looking for new volunteers to support this partner's mission of giving formerly incarcerated individuals a path to a new life.

All of these are ministries invite us into Jesus' unfolding story. To become part of his story of liberation and freedom. Unlike our brethren in the synagogue that day, we know how the story

ends. At the very end comes the promise of resurrection and eternal life with God. But for now, we find ourselves in the *middle* of this story. And this story is a wonderful, baffling paradox. Because as much as it might *demand* of us...as much as it might *cost* us...it promises us *nothing less* than life in all its fullness. Amen.