

Date: Sunday January 24, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

Title: “The Word of God”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): The word of God can be offered but it must be heard by those who gather for its reading.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): What Jesus started the disciples have continued and so it goes today. The word of God is preached when people gather and hear it.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Today we begin with an age old question: If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

If a pastor preaches a sermon, and no one is there to hear it, is the word of God shared?

Beth Lyon writes about taking on the responsibilities of an Interim Senior Pastor position in a congregation in a small Southern town. She was talking with another UCC pastor in the area, when he asked, “So, has your church received a visit from the barefoot preacher yet?” “The who?” Beth asked. The first preacher went on to tell her about a man who had been showing up unannounced at church services around the county wearing a preacher’s robes but no shoes. He would ask if he could bring the people a word from the Lord. No one knew much about him, but this barefoot preacher had shown up in several congregations in the area lately. Beth told her colleague she’d be sure to keep an eye out for him (Lyon).

Doesn’t that idea sound intriguing? What would we do if a barefoot preacher would come strolling in here some Sunday morning. I gave serious consideration

to taking my shoes and socks off at this point but decided against it. But I have to admit that the idea of this barefoot preacher, willing to share the word of God, caught hold of my imagination. I wondered how we would react. Would we listen? We are a faith community that values some order during our worship. You have come to expect a style of preaching similar to what I offer. No preacher, to my knowledge, has ever shown up here asking to speak uninvited, let alone barefoot.

So I have been wondering. If that barefoot preacher were to show up here, what would happen? Would he rant and rave? Would he call on us all to repent because the kingdom of God was at hand? Would the ushers try to throw him out? Should I bar the door? Try to keep him quiet? My guess is we would probably let him speak, at least for a short time, but then might try to find a way to get back to our order of service. Yet, perhaps the whole reason for his showing up here would be because he had the word of the Lord for us.

Week after week all over this nation, preachers climb into pulpits and take out their notes, take a deep breath, and preach. Each one of us is supposed to be bringing a word from the Lord. But nobody gets tense or worried. Nobody tries to throw us out or hush us up. Instead congregations calmly settle in, read the announcements in the bulletin, yawn, or check a watch. People expect a sermon at church, but is there ever really an expectation of a word from the Lord?

It was an ordinary Sabbath day when Jesus came to the synagogue. He was in his hometown going to services with his family, his neighbors, and his childhood friends. Nothing could have been more natural. The people sat on plain wooden benches. There was a raised platform at one end of the room. In that day, there

weren't any professional rabbis. The service was simple. Prayers were said, scriptures read and commented on, and a collection was taken for the poor. Jesus had been away doing a bit of teaching and preaching. People in the area had good things to say about him. Now he was home. What could be more normal than to ask him to read the scripture and to say a few words? They handed him the Isaiah scroll. He read a few verses. They settled in to hear what he had to say. They were expecting a sermon. They were expecting to go home commenting on what a fine job Mary and Joseph's boy had done. They weren't expecting a word from the Lord (Lyon).

A sermon, if it isn't too long, can be a nice thing. George Burns said a good sermon should have a terrific beginning and a terrific ending and the two of those should be as close together as possible. A good sermon might include a good story or two, keep folks entertained, make people feel good. The congregation can take it or leave it, agree with it or not. But a word from the Lord can't be ignored. A word from the Lord disrupts our carefully ordered routine. A word from the Lord can change things. When Jesus stood to read in the synagogue in Nazareth, he brought a word from the Lord. He read:

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 (Luke 4:18-19).

Then he rolled up the scroll, handed it back, and sat down, because sitting down was what teachers did in the synagogue. The gist of what he said to them

was this: “Today all of this has been fulfilled, right here, in Nazareth.” It was convenient to think of the prophet’s words coming to pass in some rosy, distant future. It was nice to think about those giants of faith, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, or David, encountering Almighty God. But suddenly, this word was about now; this word was about them. It was a word from the Lord.

With that brief message right to the point, Jesus told those gathered what he was about to do and what they were called to be doing. When he said that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, it meant that Jesus’ agenda was God’s agenda too. Jesus brought good news to many poor people like the hungry crowds on the hillside whom he fed with bread and fish. He showed them that God wants everyone to have enough to eat. This is the one of whom his mother sang, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, he has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Jesus brought release to the captives. Some were held captive by demons of the mind. Others were held captive to a mat by paralysis. Still others were captive to their own greed for money like Zacchaeus. Jesus set them all free. Jesus brought sight to the blind. Sometimes he did this literally as he did with the blind man by the roadside. But he opened the eyes of everyone he taught to look at God in a new and different light.

Jesus brought freedom to the oppressed like the woman who was trapped in a life where people used and despised her and at the same time labeled her the sinner, until she came to him and washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair and he lifted her to her feet again and told her about love and grace (Lyon).

Jesus proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor, the great Jubilee that took place every fifty years, when every debt was forgiven, every piece of foreclosed land returned to its original owner, and every slave was freed. The great Jubilee was a symbol of God's forgiveness, a taste of God's reign. Then he said "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). The question becomes, what do the people do with the word?

A group of preachers were lamenting about the way the people in the pews didn't listen to the sermons, ignored the words of the preachers, and refused to follow the guidance that the preachers offered from the pulpit. One preacher even said, "Lay people don't come to church to be challenged, they come to be stroked and told a bunch of sweet sentimentalities." Everyone of the group of preachers nodded their heads in agreement.

Unfortunately, unknown to them, a layperson had made her way into the gathering. This older woman rose to speak at the very moment of smugness among the preachers. She said, "Speaking for laypeople everywhere let me just say that if there is one thing we hate worse on Sunday morning than being bumped, attacked, and challenged, it is being bored! We live demanding lives. We find following Jesus to be difficult. For God's sake and ours, would you simply tell us what God tells you to tell us?" (Willimon). The people in the pews are waiting to hear it.

The good news is that what Jesus began, his disciples continued. All throughout the gospel and the story of the early church, today is never allowed to become "once, long ago," or put off until someday in the future. Today, in churches everywhere, someone is reading scripture. Today, someone is reading about God

who breathed life into us, about a God who calls us by name. Today, someone is reading about a God who brings life out of death, about a God who claims us as God's own people. Today the word of God is preached all around the world, and it is preached in this very place, because people are gathered to hear it. The word that speaks to you, that word that you hear, is the word of the Lord. A tree falls in the woods, we are there to hear it, it does make a sound. Let us pray.

Dear God,

We thank you for this opportunity to hear your word that truly is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. We hope that your word will guide us in all we do in the days ahead and that we become the living embodiment of your word upon this earth providing an example for others as to what it means to live for you. Grateful for that possibility, we pray to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Offering: Our offering will proclaim good news but only when it is shared and received by others. Let us give accordingly. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless this offering that we give in the name of Jesus Christ. Now we seek to use it to serve you by sharing it with care and compassion. This we pray. Amen.

Benediction: Go forth blessed by the word of God and may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God always. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Lyon, Beth; Glenside United Church of Christ; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com ; 2010.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Willimon, William; Pulpit Resource; Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2007.

