

Dear Friends in Christ,

**WHEN EVEN SEEING ISN'T BELIEVING**

So what Sunday is it? Some count it three Sundays before the Super Bowl. To others it is just one of the endless gray days of January. But to the Christian, it is the third Sunday of Epiphany! These Epiphany Sundays are the annual cycle of amazement, when the good news that all the weary centuries since Adam have awaited is finally revealed. A light dawns!

By the third Sunday of Epiphany is no pinkish cloud on the eastern horizon promising dawn—like Magi before a child who must yet grow thirty years before he fully looks the divine promise they worship. Nor is Epiphany 3 the electrified yellow-white glow seconds before sunrise—as John the Baptist baptizes and Jesus ascends out of the water, and at that exact moment the heavens break open and their contents fall on Jesus. Nor is this week the early morning sun shining weakly, felt only if you stand still and think about it—as the toastmaster and wedding guests at Cana laugh but the disciples wonder at the wine, because they know where it came from, sort of. In this third week of Epiphany, the sun nears mid-day—Jesus declares for any who might not yet be clear on just what is going on, Jesus takes God's holy book and declares, "This is about me!" He declares himself the source of life. Hear the Word of God:

***Read Luke 4:16-21***

*<sup>16</sup>[Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup>The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." <sup>20</sup>Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, <sup>21</sup>and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

That last sentence is the linchpin of this entire reading. ***"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*** It is Jesus' crucial claim.

Now, at this point, I think we will benefit by exploring what was going on in that synagogue. It is a setting that comes up again and again in the life of Jesus and the New Testament.

If you know your Bible well, you are probably vaguely aware that synagogues do not appear anywhere in all of the Old Testament. But in the New Testament time of Jesus, synagogues are everywhere.

From Israel's beginning, God told them to have only one place of worship. In the time of Moses, it was an elaborate tent called The Tabernacle. Four hundred years later, in the time of Solomon, it was replaced by a temple in Jerusalem. For reasons we don't have time to get into, that temple was the only place the Israelites were allowed to make their sacrifices. But there,

sacrifice for sin was made: every morning and every evening; every Passover, Feast of Tabernacles and Yom Kippur, sacrifice was made at the Jerusalem Temple. Four hundred years after that, the nation of Israel was uprooted, tens of thousands deported, the rest killed or scattered to the four winds, and critically, the temple was destroyed and sacrifice stopped. That captivity was God's harsh judgment on a people who continually snubbed their noses at him. Yet even in that judgment, through that judgment, God brought forth a tremendous good. It profoundly influenced the world Jesus lived in, *and also* Christianity to this day. The nation of Israel, in their servitude, acknowledged God's judgment on them. They repented, and they sought God in truth. They could not offer sacrifice because 800 years earlier God had very clearly said that the only place for sacrifice for sin was the temple in the promised land of Israel. But now that the place of worship was gone, and that they were at a geographical distance they had no way of crossing, how were they to turn their hearts back to the God of Abraham?

They said, "We cannot offer sacrifice for sin without a temple, but we can still gather around God's word. We once did this in our houses, but we didn't do well in our separate homes. Let us meet together, every week, at a place, a building, and there we will listen, we and our children." That was the beginning of the synagogue. So, since that time wherever the Jewish people have moved across the surface of the globe, especially after their Jerusalem temple was destroyed a second time in 70AD, they have taken the synagogue with them wherever they went.

Now here's the Christian connection. When Jesus' Apostles, who were all Jews, wondered how to give order to the new Christians they were leading, they turned to what they knew. They turned to what had served God's people so well for 500 or 600 years. They turned to the synagogue. It is fascinating how much of the pattern of the ancient synagogue service is found even in the church service we are in the middle of today!

But back to Nazareth. On the Sabbath day of our reading Jesus went to the synagogue. Before going farther, take note of a detail in the reading: "***On the Sabbath day [Jesus] went into the synagogue, as was his custom.***" How often was Jesus in the house of worship? Does that strike you as a little strange? If anyone did *not* need to be in a place of worship, would it not have been Jesus? What sins had he to confess? What word of God had he, The Word, forgotten? Yet Jesus was there every week. Is this not a sermon to all who would think they don't need what is on offer at God's house every week? We need what is here! We need grace, we need guidance, we need each other, and to encourage one another, we need to speak to God and to hear from him!

For Jesus, this synagogue was familiar. Familiar people, family liturgy. Like us, the synagogue service had a cycle of assigned readings from the Old Testament. In a service there would be seven readings. The first reading was to be read by a priest, if one were present. The second by a Levite, if one were present. And the remaining five were read by laymen of good reputation, 30 years old or older, chosen from the assembly. Jesus, as a man known well by the congregants, and as a young man newly of age to do the reading, was given the honor of reading one of those five Scriptures for the day. It is probable, though we can't say for certain, that Jesus simply read the day's assigned reading.

But it wasn't just his familiar face. Jesus had been out of town for many weeks. Everyone in the Nazareth synagogue had heard about, and some had witnessed, the events happening

around Jesus down at the Jordan River, in Jerusalem, in Cana and down the road in Capernaum. And surely, they wanted to hear him not only read the Scripture, but to also do what else was allowed, which was to speak on his Scripture selection. (Now, there was a safety valve in this process so that you would not get some crackpot up there using the pulpit as his soap box. After the reader finished his meditation on God's word, the floor was opened for people to freely question and even disagree.) This is what is happening in our reading.

***“Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.”*** To us, that seems a little strange. It sounds like Jesus read the Scripture, handed the scroll back to the attendant, sat down, and then as something of an afterthought something. But we miss something here. Toward the middle of every synagogue is a raised platform with a podium and seating. Not unlike Lutherans, posture in worship was important. The scripture reader, out of honor for God's Word, would always stand to read. But when he commented on the reading, he would sit because it was his word, not God's Word.

So, here's how it happened: after reading Jesus gave the precious hand-copied scroll to the attendant who safely stored it away. Then Jesus, before he spoke about the reading, sat down on one of the chairs on the raised platform to speak his sermon. So when it says that Jesus ***“sat down,”*** it wasn't that he went back to his seat, but he sat at one of the seats for teachers up on the platform.

Now we understand the weighty scene. We understand why ***“the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.”*** They wondered what this man, who had been reputed to do miracles, what would he say? Like a preacher's first sermon, or a highly drafted basketball forward's first start, people wanted to witness this young man's first public appearance.

Jesus read one of Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah. The Messiah, the God's chosen one, would be anointed with the Spirit of the Lord. He would come to proclaim the Lord's favor; a time of freedom, release, healing and good news; he would reinstate the kingdom of God; he was one whom millions of Jews had awaited thousands of years—and here in some po-dunk hill-town's very humble synagogue, the son of the local carpenter stood up and said, ***“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!”*** And things got complicated.

#### ***Read Luke 4:23-30***

*<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’ <sup>24</sup>I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. <sup>25</sup>I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. <sup>26</sup>Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. <sup>27</sup>And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”*

*<sup>28</sup>All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. <sup>29</sup>They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. <sup>30</sup>But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.*

Well over a hundred years ago there was a politician, no less than a member of the US

House of Representatives, who went to some big banquet. It's unclear what the point of discussion was, but this down to earth politician declared, "I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs... eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me." And that, according to the most popular tradition, is why Missouri is called the "Show Me State." Missourians, so it goes, are nice enough people, but they know the world is a tough place. There are good reasons to distrust snake oil salesmen, televangelists and emails from Nigerian millionaires. Things a little too good to be true, probably are. You had better keep your big words to yourself and just work on doing what you promised. [Source: <https://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/history/slogan>]

Can you blame the people of Nazareth? Can you blame them when one of the younger set, after being out of town for a couple months, showed up making eye popping claims about himself? Some had known him for 30 years. His dad had made the tables and chairs in their dining rooms, the doors on their house. They had seen little Jesus, poking around the shop when they ordered their cabinetry. Admittedly, Jesus had been better behaved than any of the other boys or girls, but it's quite a jump from being well-behaved to saying, "I am God's gift to humanity!"

The man from Missouri might say, "Seeing is believing," the man from Nazareth might say, "Prove it, Physician, heal yourself," but what if seeing Jesus isn't believing? What if seeing actually gets in the way? What if faith needs to be faith, and not something that requires proof. What if faith is an act of God's grace and not my human decision?

I'm not sure how you got here this morning—and here I not asking if you drove a Chevy or a Toyota—how it is that you are sitting in a Christian Church, worshiping the one who died on a cross. Why do you pin your hopes for now and eternity on him. Why don't you say, "Virgin birth? Impossible. Miracles? Active imaginations. Son of God? Nice guy, smart guy, sincere guy, but no Son of God." Why it is that you wouldn't be tempted to take Jesus when he points the accusing finger of God's Law at you, why not give him a tumble down the nearest cliff. Why do you have faith? Was it seeing?

Insert your own name in the sentence from Jesus, "*Blessed are you, [Simon son of Jonah], for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.*" I will repeat another apostolic reminder, "*No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.*"

Maybe you wish you could have lived 2000 years ago and watched Jesus perform the miracles and walked in his footsteps. But remember Nazareth. Seeing isn't believing; believing is believing. Seeing didn't help these Nazarenes. Be thankful for the faith God has planted in your heart, a trust that all your sins and failures pinned with Jesus' to the cross. Hear Jesus tell one of his disciples, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed;*" and then watch Jesus turn and set his smiling eye on you, "*[but] blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

God, keep us there. Protect us from doubt and unbelief. Keep us humble. Keep us believing. Let the light of Jesus shine on us. Amen.