

There's a big problem American Christians sometimes have. Some Christians have an expectation that if you follow Jesus, everything is going to be easy.

I think part of the problem is marketing. Some groups of Christians have tried in recent decades to market Jesus in such a way that only the positive things about the Christian life are mentioned. Everything is painted in pastel colors. There are no deeper colors, no darker shades.

I'm not sure how we have gotten away with it. After all, the central symbol of our faith is a cross. The cross is an instrument of torture, pain, and death. If the cross is at the center of the Christian faith, how could anyone possibly contend that everything will always be easy?

There's a real disconnect here. Things were not easy for Jesus. He never promised they'd be easy for his followers.

It was this way even in the beginning. Our Gospel lesson from Luke deals with the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has a very rough time even in the beginning, even in his hometown with people who knew him the best.

We heard the first part of the story in our Gospel lesson last week. Luke says in ch4: "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. "

OK, we're picking up in the middle of the story. What's been going on? Not too much—we're still early in the Gospel of Luke. But the things that HAVE happened are very important.

In ch1, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

In ch2, Jesus was born. We heard that story at Christmas

In ch3, Jesus was baptized and filled again with the Holy Spirit. We heard that story

At the beginning of ch4, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. We'll hear that reading in five weeks on the first Sunday of Lent. But Luke is very specific that, after his baptism, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness."¹

You might have noticed, there are lots of references to the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life. Conceived by the Spirit. An infilling of the Spirit at his baptism. Led by the Spirit into the wilderness to face temptations.

And then, after his temptation, Jesus begins his ministry as one who is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Last week we heard that Jesus makes a visit back home to Nazareth. That was part 1 of our Gospel lesson, and today we have part 2.

¹ Luke 4:1

Last week, we heard that on the Sabbath, Jesus goes to the synagogue, as was his custom. And he was asked to do a reading from scripture.² Nothing unusual about this. Jewish males would often do these readings. And if there was a visiting teacher at a synagogue, they were usually asked to do a reading and make a few comments about it.

Jesus is given the scroll of Isaiah, and he turns to what we would call Isaiah 61, which is a part of the writings of the third Prophet Isaiah. And Jesus reads a 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."³

Now, as readers, we know a secret: the Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus in a special way—we've heard that many times so far in Luke. And we also know another secret: Jesus is the anointed one. In English: the Anointed One. In Greek: the Christ. In Hebrew: the Messiah. We know that that's exactly who he is.

So we know Jesus isn't just reading a nice Bible reading. We know these words from third Isaiah apply directly to Jesus.

Then, Jesus rolls up the scroll, and he sits down. Sitting is THE posture for teaching. If I climb into the pulpit, you expect me to preach. If an 1st century Jewish rabbi sits down after a scripture reading, people would expect him to teach.

But imagine the shock of the crowd in when Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."⁴ That's the beginning of our Gospel lesson today. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This good news about God's anointed, this good news about God's Messiah, is fulfilled today, in your hearing. And the implicit addition would be, 'It is fulfilled by me. I'm God's anointed. This is my mission, bringing good news, proclaiming release, healing, announcing the year of the Lords favor.'

This would be shocking. The hometown boy is saying, "I'm the Messiah." What's interesting is that the people are alright with this, at least at first. They'll be furious with Jesus at the end of our Gospel lesson, but for now, they're not upset by his claim to be the Messiah. In fact, Luke says "All spoke well of him."⁵

But then Jesus does his teaching. He gives his sermon. And by the end, they're filled with rage.⁶ In the end, they try to kill him.⁷

What happened in between? They're pleased with him at first. Then he preaches. And then they're ready to kill him. What happened?

² Luke 4:16

³ Luke 4:18-1-

⁴ Luke 4:21

⁵ Luke 4:22

⁶ Luke 4:28

⁷ Luke 4:29

First, the hometown boy comes home. He says he's the Messiah. Great! The people might think, "We'll have special privileges, we'll have the inside track. He'll make us look good." The people of Nazareth will no longer be low on the Jewish totem pole—they're going to be at the top. That seems to be the expectation. Luke doesn't say that explicitly. But that seems to be the implicit hope.

But Jesus dashes their hope. He hasn't come just to give special privileges to the folks from his hometown. He hasn't even come just for the Jewish people. He has come to bring good news and God's love to all nations, beginning with the Jewish people, but not stopping with them. If they think he's come just for them, they are sadly mistaken.

And I believe that Jesus has picked up on these hopes they have. Because he uses a couple of tough illustrations.⁸ He says, 'Remember the prophet Elijah?' (Oh yes, one of the greatest prophets we've ever had.) 'Remember there was a famine in Israel?' (Oh yes, tough famine.) 'And remember who Elijah miraculously provided food for? A Lebanese woman. A widow in Zarephath.'⁹ (Uhh—hmm.)

Then he continues: 'Remember the Prophet Elisha?' (Oh yeah, sure, another great prophet.) 'And remember there used to be lots of lepers in Israel?' (Oh yes, wasn't it terrible?). 'And who did he cure? A Syrian General. Naaman, the leper.'¹⁰ (Grrr.)

And after that sermon, after they've had the final blessing and sung the final hymn, what is the reaction to the sermon? Kill the preacher.

Jesus is bursting their bubbles and dashing their hopes. He's the Messiah? Great. 'Great for us!' the people think.

But Jesus isn't going to play that game. And he says so. And so they try to kill him.

What they've done is something we often do. They tried to filter Jesus through their own set of filters. They were looking at Jesus in terms of what they were wanting and what they were hoping for and what he could do for them.

But Jesus won't be filtered by their filters. In fact, he demands to be THE filter by which they judge reality.

We don't run Jesus through our filters. Jesus IS the filter. He is the way, the truth and the life. He is the one who has come from God. He is filled with God's Holy Spirit. He is God's only begotten.

And he calls the shots, not us.

And this is so hard for the people of Nazareth. And it's so hard for us.

⁸ with thanks for these insights from the late, great Fred Craddock

⁹ Luke 4:25-26

¹⁰ Luke 4:27

Because there's nothing harder than trying to teach people something they already think they know. There's nothing harder than having to unlearn something in order to really learn it.

I was watching a documentary about the proliferation of unmanned drones being flown by the US Air Force. And the Air Force has found they cannot use experienced Air Force pilots to fly these drones by remote control. Flying a drone by remote control is very different than piloting a plane while riding in it. Air Force pilots who fly planes rely on sensing acceleration, and feeling when they're turning, and hundreds of other physical sensations that help them fly. So these pilots have a U difficult time transferring their skills to sitting in a earthbound chair, watching a TV screen, and flying a drone by remote control. Real Air Force pilots are not very good at flying drones.

So the Air Force has found they have to go out and recruit other officers, officers with absolutely no flight training or experience, and train them to pilot unmanned drones. It's too tough to try to make experienced pilots unlearn the things they think they know when flying drones.

There's nothing harder than trying to teach people something they already think they know. There's nothing harder than having to unlearn something in order to really learn it.

And that can be so tough for us, especially in a congregation that's been around for 109 years. We may have to unlearn some things. We may have to change our expectations of the way God works. That is, if we really want to follow God, if we want to be responsive to his will, if we want to try to live into his vision for St. Paul's.

Instead of running God through our filters, instead of trying to do things our way, we have to surrender to his will. We have to be able to pray as Jesus did, "Not my will, but Thy will be done."

One of my favorite prayers in the Prayer Book says it this way:

"Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen."¹¹

¹¹ BCP p. 832