

# Unseen Presence

sermon digest

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Luke 4:16-30  
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It was an interesting jumping off place. Going back as a young adult to the old home place, as anyone knows, is always something of a gamble. You may meet up with overwhelming welcome and acclaim—little Sam or Sally now grown up and making good. Or you may meet up with suspicion and even jealousy—this after all is just Johnny’s kid, talking big. Luke puts the story at the very beginning, unlike Matthew and Mark who place it later in Jesus’ ministry. Luke seems to be more interested in using the story as a key to revealing who Jesus is and what his ministry will be, than in following a set chronology. Straight from his baptism and wilderness temptation, Jesus’ teaching ministry meets great acclaim in Galilee, and then he enters the synagogue at Nazareth, his hometown. And just as if he is the hometown boy made good, he is handed the scroll and begins to read. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he reads from Isaiah,

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” (Is.62:1-2).

After he had finished reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, and sat down to teach. “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,” Luke says, heightening the drama. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he assures them. The home crowd, Luke says, was pleased: “All spoke well of him and were amazed” at his “gracious words.” “He may be the carpenter’s son,” they seem to be saying, “but listen to how he can preach! Who knows? Maybe the rumors we’ve been hearing are correct. Maybe we do have a prophet in our midst! It’s about time isn’t it? Maybe now little old Nazareth will get some respect. It’s about time!”

Jesus’ message, however, continues. Sometimes, you see, a preacher would do well just to shut up, just to stop while she’s ahead, while everyone is basking in the warmth of her glow. Jesus goes on to expound on Isaiah’s words; and in the process, he pulls the props out from under the townsfolk’s expectation of him. “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

“Yes, Jesus!” the people must be thinking. “That’s exactly what we want you to do.”

To their dismay, Jesus continues: “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.” And then he goes on to remind them of Elijah, who during a three-and-a-half-year drought, attended not to the widows among his own people, but to the needs of a lowly widow in a remote area of Sidon. And then there was Elisha, he reminds them, who though there were many lepers in Israel, healed instead Naaman, a Syrian, of all things.

When the people heard this, “all in the synagogue,” Luke says, “were filled with rage” and drove him out of town. What a change in attitude! What happened? How could they move from praising his “gracious words” one minute to seeking to drive him over a cliff the next?

Jesus, this preacher/teacher, Fred Craddock observes, had committed the unforgivable sin. He had used the people’s very own Scriptures against them. For you see, throughout, from God’s covenant with Abraham to the visions of their prophets, their scriptures had envisioned Israel as a blessing in the midst of the earth. Throughout, Scripture had beckoned them toward hospitality, openness and concern for others. Abraham’s tent, tradition proudly taught, opened in all four directions so that it might receive and minister to the needs of any who came. And yet the townspeople are upset that Jesus will minister to outsiders, to the disreputable, Gentile population of Capernaum. Jesus leaves Nazareth and goes elsewhere; but pay close attention here. “Jesus,” Craddock observes, “does not go elsewhere because he is rejected; he is rejected because he goes elsewhere” [Interpretation: Luke, 63].

If you want to be successful in ministry, in other words, there are some people better left out of the picture, better left unheard, unseen, unacknowledged. And as Luke will show throughout his account of Jesus’ ministry, this was a reality Jesus not once, not twice, but throughout failed to grasp. “The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me,” Jesus says, for just this: “to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” And from this opening scene to the end of his ministry, that is not just what he says. It is what he does. And so, you come away thinking, should his church.

**The breadth of God's grace pushes us beyond any boundaries we would impose.** Reflecting on Nazareth's reaction to the reach of Jesus' ministry, Alan Culpepper suggests that the struggle of that first century community is not unlike our own. "God's grace is never subject to the limitations and boundaries of any nation, church, group, or race," he insists; and those who seek to exclude others end up excluding themselves. "Throughout history, the gospel has always been more radically inclusive than any group, denomination, or church, so we continually struggle for a breadth of love and acceptance that more nearly approximates the breadth of God's love"<sup>[New Interpreter's Bible: Luke, 108]</sup>.

Every generation of every nationality, every race and every faith tradition must rigorously look for its own blind spots, its own preference that those whom it "others" remain unheard, unseen and unattended by the mercy and compassion exemplified and commanded by the God we would serve.

Fifty years ago this April, Martin Luther King sat in a Birmingham jail, having been arrested for participating in a campaign to end segregation. Responding to the stinging blow delivered by a statement released by eight Alabama clergymen, who censured the campaign as "unwise and untimely," King's now famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," scribbled on bits and pieces of paper, built the case for his action. At one particularly moving point in the letter, he speaks in clear tones about the largely unseen suffering of Alabama's Black citizens and what he would later call "the fierce urgency of now." "We have waited," he insists, "for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights."

The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait [<sup>"Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *Why We*</sup>

<sup>*Can't Wait*, 81-82]</sup>.

Simply waiting for "time" to pass reveals a tragically irrational misconception that time will somehow automatically cure all ills. "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability," King insists. It only comes through the tireless efforts of those who would be "co workers with God" <sup>[86]</sup>.

**We partner with God in meeting the "fierce urgency of now."** Their numbers seem endless as do their needs: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and imprisoned. And if we are not careful, we will become jaded and fall back on the words of Jesus himself: "The poor [and the thirsty, and the stranger, and the naked and imprisoned] you will always have with you." I recall a conference in the 1980's when I very personally felt myself among those facing an injustice. As I led a panel discussion about the frustration of women being blocked from fulfilling their calling into ministry, the urgency of the situation hit me as I realized that waiting another 30 or 40 years for needed change was too long. The window of opportunity for those sitting on the panel was limited and with the passage of time, it would no longer be an option for us.

Recognizing that the injustices and needs of our world have been around generation upon generation, we anesthetize ourselves to the extent that we no longer see the pain or the people who bear it. And, frankly, we can get by that way. We can busy ourselves with a good deed here and a coin of charity there

and feel content that we have done our part. Doing so, however, cuts us off from the intense creativity, labor and determination necessary for addressing those situations that inflict such harm on people's lives. Doing so means that we put blinders on, lest we see too much of that pain. Doing so means that we scarcely see the people, just as we miss seeing in them the presence of the Christ: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Mt. 25:45).

This week volunteers will fan out across our county to identify the homeless. Yes, there are those who refuse to see them and admit they are really there. And there is the temptation we all face of just being so overwhelmed that we throw up our hands in despair of ever making a dent in the problem. Last year's Point-in-Time Count set the number at 85, and this year we know that those identified last year do not even begin to take into account the precariously housed or "couch surfers," who scurry among friends and family, trying to keep a roof over their heads. Compared to the 633,000+ who are homeless in our country on any given night, the local numbers may seem to pale. I appreciate, however, the strenuous effort TORCH and their volunteers are making "to put a face on homelessness" in our community so that in identifying them, we can respond to their need. "Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."