

January 31, 2016  
Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

**“Is it Worth the Risk?”**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Jeremiah 1:4-10 ~ Luke 4:21-30

Do you ever think of the church as a dangerous place? Do you even realize the risk you're taking ... coming here today? In the last few years, insurance companies have made great strides through intentional "risk management" programs for churches. We are encouraged to have policies in place to protect our children and youth from predators. We are asked to review all fire and traffic and security arrangements to make our buildings are safe places for every person who enters our doors. We have a defibrillator in case someone suffers a heart attack. I believe these are great ideas because they are all wonderful, proactive measures taken to manage risk ... but ... no matter how hard we try to circumvent all fore-seeable dangers ... coming to church will always be risky.

Years ago, in a little book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard mused:

“Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? ... On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church ... we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life-preservers and signal flares ... they should lash us to the pews.”

Just look what happened to Jesus when he went to the Sabbath service at the synagogue in his hometown. He knew these people and they knew him, or thought they did. Jesus had been away for awhile, but now he was back, with some rumors racing before him. A friend of a friend had told somebody ... who told somebody ... about some signs and wonders that Jesus performed over in Capernaum ... and they all turned out to see for themselves.

In those days the rabbis would sit down when they preached, which gave them endurance, which is probably why preachers are made to stand nowadays. And in those days, they would invite visiting rabbis to preach ... so that day they invited Jesus, their home town boy, preceded by rumor, to be guest preacher. They took out the scroll, and unrolled it to the assigned reading for the day. Jesus rose and read the text from Isaiah ... we heard those words in last Sunday's gospel. *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.*

This was an ancient and subversive word from Isaiah, a radical counter cultural prophet. It spoke of a world turned upside down. In Isaiah's day, only the king was anointed ... preachers weren't

anointed. And you didn't preach good news to the poor, because they were cheap labor ... and good news to the poor would cost the wealthy more taxes than they wanted to pay. And you didn't release captives ... or why would you capture them in the first place? In fact, many of the prisoners of war were blinded as a means to control them ... or pushed into slavery to get public projects done. Who else was going to do that work and what would it cost? And "the year of the Lord's favor," the so-called "Jubilee," was the most subversive idea of all. All debts were forgiven, so everybody had a fresh start. All lands reverted to their original owners, no matter who had forced their owners into selling. And all slaves went free.

Revolutionary! But imagine the cost, the disruption! Why, the very idea would mean the end of war for profit ... and special interests and economic advantage! No wonder Isaiah and the other prophets with him were persecuted by the kings and priests and merchants ... all the people who ran things ... who had a vested interest in the status quo! But by Jesus' day, the message had been idealized ... relegated to the past ... or to a future so distant that it had no bearing on the present. And even when we read it today, nobody gets nervous, because we don't really believe it, do we? We don't really think God would turn everything upside down like that ... so it's safe to say these dangerous words out loud, but hardly anybody even thinks about what they actually mean. So, the Nazarenes weren't perturbed by the scripture reading. And even when Jesus sat down, and began his message by saying "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," they didn't raise an eyebrow.

Instead they began to whisper, "O-o-o-oh! Isn't he special?" "What a lovely voice!" "His daddy would've been so proud of him today!" They paternalized Jesus. They were all so proud of their homeboy, which of course, was a way of being proud of themselves.

Oh, they loved their local boy Jesus, and he would have been a big hit if he had only stopped right there. That's what gets most preachers in trouble. They don't know when to stop. Instead, Jesus cut right to the heart of their pride, even their pride in him. "You people," he said. "You've come to hear your home town hero today. You want to see some sleight of hand from one of your own. But I won't do miracles to entertain you and I won't perform to make you proud. I know you too well. You think you're God's favorites in all the world. But think about this ... in the days of Elijah, God picked a *foreigner* to bless. In the days of Elisha, God healed a general in your *enemy's* army. You see, God loves everybody, not just you. God sends you prophets to tell you the truth, and what you do is kill them." And when he said that, they wanted to kill him by throwing him off the cliff!

It was an extreme form of what modern specialists call "audience response criticism." Not the kind of reaction most preachers hope for, which is why some only preach sweet messages on healthy self-adjustment to life's little irritations ... or loudly condemn "them" whenever they're talking to "us." You can't go wrong confirming the opinions that people already hold. You won't get in trouble "comforting the comfortable" and "afflicting the already afflicted." But Jesus meddled in their business. He burst the bubble of their pride and made them see themselves as they really were. And it made them furious!

Jesus will do that. God has a way of stepping on our toes. The Bible messes with our business. We get used to ignoring the people standing on our street corners begging for help. We seal our

souls against the news that our senior adults are getting squeezed by the cost of their prescriptions while drug companies make record profits. We ignore the cries of our brothers and sisters who want to know why our prison populations are 80% non-white. We often miss the point that when we say "God bless America," the rest of the world hears us say "God curse everybody else."

But when we read the Bible, it says, "In as much as you've done it to the least of these, you've done it also to me." It says, "Take care of the widows and orphans among you." It says, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." It says, "Love your enemies." It says, "God loves all nations and peoples." We do know what it says, but we don't often believe that God is calling every single one of us to take those words into our hearts and truly live them!

To tell the truth, there are lots of times I read the text for the week and I want to run, and this week was one of those times. The smart thing to do with a text like this is to avoid it all together lest some are offended by its indictment. But one of the reasons I love the lectionary is that it won't let me do the smart thing ... it holds me accountable to listen to what the Holy Spirit offers as a way into the texts ... and that helps keep me honest, with you, and more importantly, with myself.

But I'm sure not always ready to do what today's scripture proclaims. Like most other folks, I come here to meet God, but do I really want to? God might just change me and you in ways we aren't ready to change. So for just a moment, think of me as an insurance agent, and let me offer a few tips on spiritual risk management where it comes to this dangerous God.

I suppose one way to manage the risk is not to come at all ... to blame the church for not being what it ought to be ... to say they're all hypocrites anyway, announce you're a "spiritual" person but not "religious" (which really means you don't give a hoot about other people and don't want to be bothered with the entangling obligations of community). Well, that can be pretty lonely, so we can come, but manage the risk by ignoring the scriptures we don't like and listening only to those passages that make us feel good ... that affirm what we already think and how we already live. Or we can let your minds wander during worship ... to where we're going to get lunch or we can critique the choir or reflect on when the walls might need painting. That way, God's not likely to get through. Or we can listen closely, but when we hear something in scripture we don't like, anything that makes us uncomfortable, we can get mad and call it "fundamentalism," ... we can deny we might need changing. One of my personal favorites is to listen attentively and openly, all the while, straining to pat my self on the back for my brilliance in realizing how much John needs to hear the message!

All of these are useful ways to dodge the bullet ...to manage the holy ...to deny the truth about ourselves. But Luke tells us what happens when we reject the word of the Lord: "*(Jesus) passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*" That was the benediction to the service at Nazareth that day, and they are sad, sad words. An epitaph for the synagogue at Nazareth and for any church that refuses to listen and for any person who turns a deaf ear to God: "*(Jesus) passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*"

On the other hand, you and I can open ourselves to the fierce love of God and let God show us where we need to change our minds and hearts, and let the power of God change us. It might mean giving up some things, or it might mean taking up some things. It might mean changing our habits ... forgiving some people who have hurt us ... loving everybody with the love of Christ ... even the people we don't like. It might mean reordering our priorities to put Christ at the center of our lives.

I hope you're not going to get angry with me for telling you what I read in the Book...that you can't manage the risk...that you can't domesticate the wild Lion of Judah. You and I both know, worship can be painful, and it needs to be painful sometimes, if it is true. But we also know that this pain is like surgery, the wound that heals. We don't want to have it, but we know we need it sometimes ... and avoiding it will only lead to worse suffering, even to death. But we have all seen what happens to people who let God in ... what happens in those moments when a congregation lets God get loose and stops trying to manage the risk. Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, they weren't perfect people. But they let God take hold of them, and our world is not the same.

And if you dare, listen again to these words, but this time as if they were your personal, individual response to God: *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.*

What would it take for you to say "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?" Is it worth the risk?

May we pray?

Holy God, We know you love us as we are, and that you love us too much to leave us as we are. And your first grace is telling us the truth about ourselves, seeing behind our masks, exploding our easy self-justifications. Your word interferes with our ways, but shows us the way to life. Forgive us for thinking we can manage you. But give us the courage to listen to your word, open ourselves to your transforming love, and follow you. O God, let Jesus walk through the midst of us today, and stay. We pray this in his name. Amen.