

I

To be honest, it's not the image of the man with the buffalo horns and the face paint that bothers me the most. Nor is it the man carrying the Confederate battle flag or the man sporting the Camp Auschwitz T-shirt or even the people wearing tactical gear and carrying plastic handcuffs while milling around in the legislative chambers.

In my mind, it's easy to decide that that bunch is just crazy. It's easy for me to decide that they're just deluded, that they're just sick and in need of a mental health intervention.

But the images that keep haunting me, the thought that I can't get out of my mind, is of the hundreds, if not thousands of people that participated in that mob while shouting the name of Jesus. The part that keeps gnawing at me is the sight of all those crosses and bibles in so many hands.

II

And I think that's part of what has many of us so bewildered. The attack on the capitol wasn't perpetrated by a foreign nation in an effort to secure some military or economic objective. The attack on the capitol wasn't perpetrated by a few dozen criminals who surreptitiously planned their deeds and then launched a surprise attack.

The attack on the capitol was perpetrated in broad daylight by hundreds, if not thousands of our neighbors, by people who by and large look like us, by people who very well could have grown up next door to us in our own hometowns.

That's the part that seems so bewildering, I think, to most of us. We're learning that many of the people who participated in the violence are small business owners and real estate agents and police officers and state representatives and retired military officers.

Many of them are just like the people that we all grew up with, hometown people. And yet they heard something that they didn't like. And they formed into a mob and committed horrific acts of violence, and we're all left wondering not only how it happened, but why.

And believe it or not, a similar thing happened very early on in Jesus' ministry.

III

This winter and spring, we're reading and preaching our way through the gospel according to Luke, and in our story for this morning, we find Jesus in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. The bible doesn't tell us much about Jesus' childhood and teen years, but we can guess that he was raised in the same way other Jewish boys were in his era. He likely grew up going to the synagogue in Nazareth every Sabbath day.

When we come to our story today, Jesus has come to his home church, if you will. He's among the people who have known him his whole life. He's among the people who would have been his Sunday School teachers, the people who might have smiled at him and snuck him a peppermint, the people whose songs

and prayers he heard every week, the people whom he looked up to as he was coming of age.

When we come to our story today, Jesus has begun his public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing throughout the region. But this Sabbath day, Jesus has come home.

So listen now for a Word from God from Luke

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“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.”*
And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and

were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “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.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

This is a weird story, isn't it? I've known a lot of preachers in my lifetime whose sermons have landed like lead balloons. I've preached my share of sermons that have generated some rather blunt and direct feedback.

But in this story, Jesus goes to his hometown, preaches to his home congregation on the Sabbath day, and by the end of the story, his own synagogue, the people who raised him, the people

who have known him his entire life, have formed a violent mob and are trying to throw him over a cliff? What is it that set them off? What is it that they found to be so offensive?

Let's walk through the story again and see if we can spot where it all went sideways. When Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, when he proclaimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, and that he has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, everything was good.

When Jesus said, "Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing," everyone was pleased. Hometown boy makes good, and all that.

But here's where it went off the rails. Jesus began to remind his hometown people about times when God's mercy was poured out on the outsiders first, and the insiders had to wait.

You may recall, we read the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath earlier this fall. The foreign widow woman was an outsider in every conceivable way, and yet God worked in and through her, an outsider, while the insiders still suffered through the drought.

Jesus reminded his hometown people about the story of Elisha, who, when many inside Israel were suffering skin diseases, was sent to bring healing to a foreign soldier, an outsider.

The people of Jesus' home synagogue were pleased with the notion that good news is brought to the poor and sight to the blind and release to the captives, so long as the poor and the blind and the captive looked and prayed and acted like them.

But Jesus turned upside down his hometown synagogue's notions about who is *in* with God and who is *out*. Jesus turned upside down their notions about who is *worthy* of grace and who is *unworthy*.

And that's what sent them over the edge. They formed a mob and prepared to throw Jesus off a cliff, and according to Luke, Jesus managed to pull some kind of Jedi trick and escape.

But this is also foreshadowing. For as we will see as we read through Luke's gospel, Jesus will continue to turn upside down all kinds of notions about the order of things. Jesus will continue to challenge notions of power and privilege. Jesus will continue to preach the message that in the coming kingdom of God, that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. And later, instead of a cliff, the crowds will prepare for him a cross.

IV

Who is in, and who is out? Who is worthy, and who is unworthy? Every society makes its own rules about these questions.

But you, you are worthy, you are in, you are loved by God, not because of any rules that society has made. You are in, you are worthy, you are loved, not because of your politics, not because of your race, not because of your religion,

not because of where you come from or who your people are, but because of who God is.

You are worthy, you are in, you are loved and cherished by God not because of what you've done or not done or what you've said or not said, but because of what God has done for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But here's the hard part, at least for me, and maybe for you, too. There are some people in this world that I find very hard to love. There are some people in this world that I think are undeserving of God's grace. There are some people in this world that I think of as *those* people, who, by definition, are not *our* people. And I suspect, my friend, that you've got your own rubric in your own mind about who are *our* people and who are *those* people.

The people that stormed the capitol on January 6 clearly have a vision of who they see as deserving and undeserving. They clearly have a vision about who is worthy and who is unworthy in our society.

And I think they, too, would find Jesus' sermon at Nazareth confounding. Because the confounding and surprising thing about the grace of God is that God's grace is not limited by our human categories. God's grace is not limited by our human understanding. God's grace is not bound by our notions of who should be first and who should be last. God's grace cannot be stopped by a cliff, or a cross, or a mob.

And thanks be to God, God's grace is always stronger than your sin, and my

sin. God's love is always stronger than all the hate you or I can muster. God's light is always more powerful than our darkness.

V

We have heard quite a bit of rhetoric these days about this being a time for choosing sides. You and I have heard quite a bit of rhetoric in recent days about how either you're with us or against us.

But make no mistake, friends, Jesus told us in his very first sermon whose side he is on. He has come to bring good news to the poor. He has come to restore sight to the blind. He has come to proclaim release to the captives. He has come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus is on the side of those who have been told time and again that they don't count.

Jesus is on the side of those who have been told time and again that they're not worthy.

Jesus is on the side of those who have been told time and again that they have no place.

That's where the Lord stands. On the side of the oppressed and the wronged. And where the Lord stands, so must the church stand, because the church is the possession of God.

God's grace won't be stopped by a mob, or a cliff, or a cross.

Thanks be to God. Amen.