

Fulfilled

A couple weeks ago, the daily devotional that I read was talking about how Jesus uses the Hebrew Scriptures. This particular instance is notable, because well, for one thing he mixes a few things together (Isaiah 58: 6 and 61: 1-2). This doesn't actually appear to be all that problematic, the crowd is impressed with his "gracious words," they don't actually get mad at him until he basically refuses to do any miracles for them. The other thing he does is cut off one of the thoughts in mid-sentence, he ends his erstwhile quotation from Isaiah without the second phrase of verse 61: 2: "And proclaim the day of the vengeance of our God."

The thing about cutting off the vengeance of God is not a small change. Most of the expectations about the Messiah were tied up in God somehow making it bad for the enemies of the people. There is a stream of material in the Hebrew Scriptures that presents God as the righteous hero of the people, the protector, defender, the Lord of Hosts, which Eugene Peterson likes to translate: God of the Angel Armies. Jesus doesn't really embrace this idea very much. In fact, I think the reason why he was mixing up the two Isaiah verses and lopping off the expected conclusion is because he is trying to emphasize a different kind of vision: "good news to the poor," "release to the captives," "recovery of sight to the blind," the oppressed going free, "the year of the Lord's favor."

All of those things are part of the truth about the Messiah, but people often seemed to focus on the militant aspect of the Messiah, the great ruler. Jesus was there to do something different, but he was still the fulfillment of the promise that was made, just not in the way that people expected. Jesus deliberately, and in the presence of the people who knew him from way back when, both claims the identity of the Messiah and denies that it is what they think it is. "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." For some reason the lectionary splits this story into two pieces, the first there is the thing he says, and the second is the reaction and what follows.

I don't really agree with that, so what I'm going to do is tell you what follows and then next week I'll talk about 1 Corinthians 13. First off, people liked what he had to say, they were impressed by his gracious words. So like I said, no one got upset about his creative editing of Isaiah, and no one got upset about him saying he was the fulfillment of prophecy. But the story doesn't end there, Jesus goes on to talk about more stories from the Scripture, specifically the Elijah narrative, where the prophet doesn't work his miracles for the people of Israel but for a widow in Zarephath and the Elisha story where the prophet doesn't heal any of the lepers in Israel but rather heals Naaman, a Syrian general and enemy of the people.

That ticks them off, and they try to throw him off of a cliff. So what is going on here? Well, simply put, people want prophets to be on their side, and when they prove to be otherwise they become a bit hostile. People love to hear a prophet rip into the other team, but when they turn on their own tribe? It gets a bit heated. This is not foreign idea in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is, in fact, what the entire story of Jonah is actually about, whales or fish to the side. Nobody wants their enemies to be saved, everybody wants a vengeful God to take care of their nasty problems, but not turn the wrath on them.

It doesn't much matter what is at stake is an entirely positive thing, like, I don't know, salvation. Did you ever notice how many folks seem to only value their salvation in as much as they can deny it to other people? Like the idea that God might save everyone seems to just rub some folk all the way wrong, because if everyone is going to be saved, why bother trying to be good, why bother trying to

abide by a law, why bother trying to follow Jesus? I think that if I was really into heaven being an exclusive members only club, Jesus might kind of tick me off too. Because it seems like he's always trying to get me to care about other people, and not just the good ones either, the poor, oppressed, the captives, the sinners and the tax collectors, the meek, those who mourn, you know all the riff raff. Nary a whiff of angel armies anywhere to be found.

It's almost like Jesus is pretty hostile to the constant in-group formation. It's almost like the people he really challenges are the ones who are safe in their assumptions of righteousness. And it isn't that he's criticizing righteousness either, it's not the law that he is trying to bring down, it is the ego of those who adhere to the law so rigidly that they miss the imperative to love. It wasn't Jesus claiming to be the fulfillment of Scripture that got them riled up, as some people often misinterpret, they liked that part, it's the teaching that follows, that prophets, and perhaps the Messiah himself will be more efficacious outside the immediate sphere of the in group.

When I was growing up our church got involved with a program called Spirit Alive, which was run by the evangelical group Presbyterians for Renewal, or PFR. The premise of the program was that you would put together teams of gifted ministers of different sorts and travel for a week of special events in other churches. You had youth ministers and preachers and spiritual formation types, I remember some pretty cool events when they visited our church. When you hosted a week, people from your congregation might get enlisted into the process to be members of a team that would visit another church. My Dad, being a preacher, got involved in going on these special team visits, and he did it for a few years here and there. He would always come home and talk about how well everything went.

A few years ago, when I was moderating a Session for a church that was between Pastors, I did some fill in preaching for them, and they just thought I was great. I began to get pretty full of myself for a minute, but the thing is, I noticed my regular congregation didn't seem any more impressed than usual. If I was such a hot shot at one place, why couldn't I get the regular folks tuned up too? I asked my Dad about that phenomenon and he told me that what he learned from several years of doing Spirit Alive in various congregations, is that it is much easier to be a travelling star than it is to be a shepherd.

I think another way you could say that is that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." I find it to be true in some instances that when I speak in someplace other than this room, I always get at least a few random strangers who go out of their way to make a fuss over me. I'm not fishing for compliments here, I take the work I do from this pulpit far more seriously than to imagine that it's all about me and what you think of me. I don't need you to be always gushing about how great I am, that's not the goal, in fact, my Dad told me that once he realized that this travelling star thing was a reality, it was actually sort of a relief and helped him stay much more on balance. To realize that the same thing happened to Elijah, Elisha and Jesus? Well that just keeps me sane.

My point here is that, from your side of this equation, I might tick you off sometimes and that probably means I'm doing my job. Sometimes you might think I'm coming from somewhere you don't expect, but that is actually something you should expect. The actual thing that God is doing often requires us to get our own egos out of the way, mine and yours. The remarkable thing is that Jesus is actually doing that: he proclaims that he is the fulfillment of the prophecy, the minute people are happy about that he then proceeds to do his best to make them angry and almost gets himself killed. Maybe it was just a trial run for the Passion. He does basically the same thing between Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

If you think the will of God is fulfilled, it's probably not. And when you think it can't possibly be the will of God, it very well might be close at hand. That's a tricky place to be sometimes, but only until you learn to expect that it's the case, like the Apostle Paul did over the course of his life, where his plans gradually gave way to God's plans, and in living through that he became more and more like the Christ that he served. Learning to say, as Jesus did, "not my will, but thy will be done," is a crucial step towards realizing what all the prophecy was actually about: God bringing light out of darkness, and hope from despair, joy from sorrow, and on and on and on.