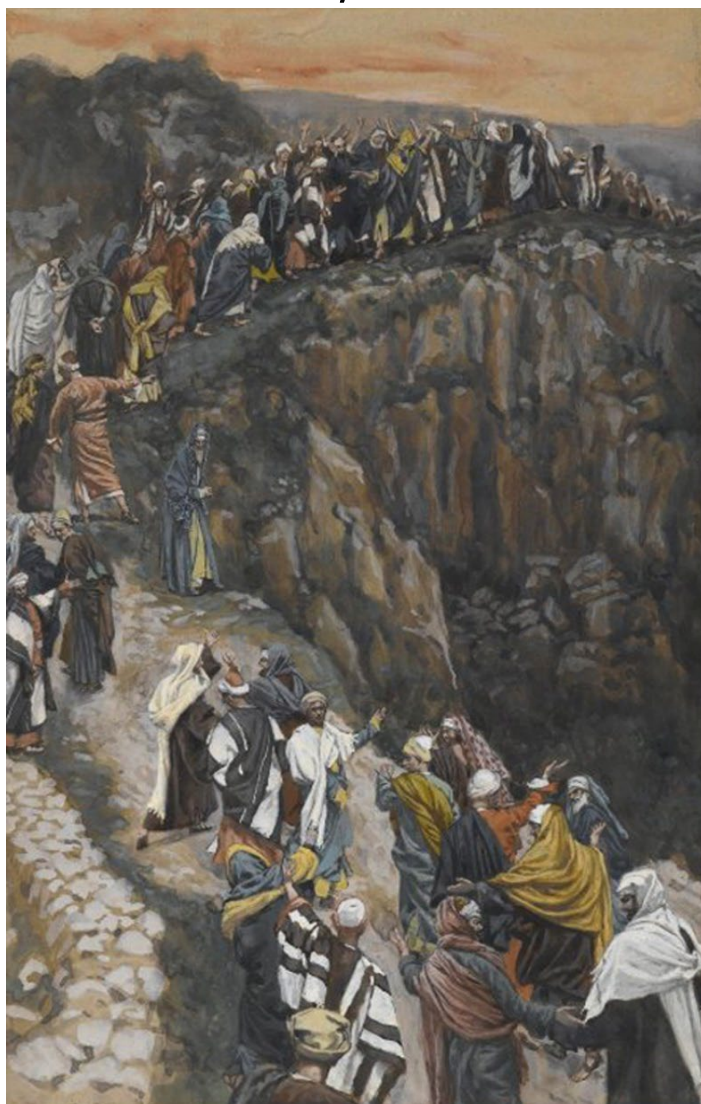


Inner Work, Outer Work



Luke 4:16-30

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At the beginning of his ministry, after Jesus was baptized and tempted by the Devil in the wilderness, he returned to his hometown. He had been teaching and healing throughout Galilee, developing a strong following, and now he returns home. In the synagogue he read from the prophet Isaiah, *"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 of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* Then with the eyes of all upon him he said, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* He crystalizes his ministry with these words.

His hometown crowd was impressed. But then someone whispered, "Isn't he Joseph's son?" People started shaking their heads and squinting their eyes at this upstart kid acting like a know-it-all. *"No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown,"* Jesus countered. Then, not giving in to their patronizing, he reminds them that prophets like Elijah and Elisha did not cater to closed minded expectations. Elijah cared for a widow from Zarephath – who was not Jewish but a gentile. Elisha cured a Syrian general from leprosy. Trigger alert! These people could not stomach Jesus speaking well of outsiders and different ethnicities. How dare he be so woke! They dragged him to the edge of a cliff – but he slipped out of their grasp and passed through the midst of them. He didn't yell or scream or fight or battle; he just walked away, and went on to do the work he was called to do.

Where did Jesus get that rock-solid self-confidence and clarity? He knew he was called to offer good news – to everyone, not just to members of his tribe. His work was to preach to captives, the blind, the rejected, the oppressed, and to proclaim release, joy and God's love, not just to one race, religion, ethnic origin, or gender. Hammered out by years of meditation and study, Jesus was proclaiming the focus of his ministry: confirmed by scripture and faith, that God's grace extends out beyond his Jewish community even to people from Sidon or Syria, Israel's sworn enemies, whom they had battled for generations. The whole crowd was triggered, furious that Jesus would talk about foreigners and gentiles in a positive light! How dare he! Those are enemies, unclean, aliens! They grab him and drag him to a cliff at the edge of the village to throw him off.

Most of us probably chuckle at than those foolish villagers. We in our age would never be so small minded, right? Well, consider how would it go over today in a local synagogue if someone gave a talk expressing sympathy for the Palestinian cause? Or how is our nation doing with dialogue about immigrants seeking asylum or being respectful of transgender athletes or soldiers? Where are we with teaching our nation's history of slavery, women's rights. How are we doing with bridging political divides between our two parties and not being triggered by certain key words? Yea... At least we're not trying to throw people off of cliffs, though too many are sending death threats and waving guns around. To heck with talking about people from Sidon or Syria. Benjamin Cremer, a Wesleyan pastor and writer said: *"When you worship power, compassion and mercy will look like sins."*

This past week we have been inundated with a barrage of change and uncertainty. A new sheriff is in town (or should I say king?) – and new deputies are being confirmed. Many of us are confused and upset; others are less so or are cheering these on. But for all of us it has been a roller coaster ride. Like Jesus, we can all use a

center of calm and inner strength to not feel swept away by this tide of change. We can assist those in need and those we love, and become prayerfully strong for the struggle that lies ahead.

Jesus was able to be so calm because he had done his inner work that gave him a center of clarity and strength, enough to stand up to his hometown folks. There is outer work and inner work. He had spent long retreats fasting and in deep prayer, he had struggled with his inner demons and been cleansed. He had studied and meditated for years in solitude. So, when people criticized him for the path he had taken, he just went on his own way. He knew exactly what God had called him to do – and it was not to live up to other people’s petty expectations. Jesus had done his inner work that allowed him to pursue his outside work with determination and strength.

Eboo Patel, a youth activist and writer said this about the need to do our inner work in order to be effective. He writes: *“The greatest need we have around pluralism in our nation is the need for civic dialogue. To have civic dialogue we need some measure of inner tolerance and self-discipline, to allow us to authentically listen to others, without resorting to bullying and rejection and stifling.”* He is clear that inner work and self-discipline precedes outer dialogue and action.

Just as outer work provides income, structure, and creativity; so inner work orders our interior landscape, giving us a center of direction, peace, and sustenance. St. Paul talks about ‘divine training’ – an inner practice of sorting out our angels from demons, friendly beasts from monsters. Divine training is like a labyrinth leading down into dark places within our own hearts, to face chaos and to seek transformation, clarity and peace. St. Theresa of Avila writes about the “interior castle” that God has built within us, that we discover through faith and in prayer. In this castle we can be loved and accepted for all of who we are. We hear of the Desert Father, St. Anthony, who faced terrifying demons that attacked and tempted him. The inner world can be terrifying, but it is the workplace of prayer, where we foster God’s order, peace, and harmony. In our faith we tap into wellsprings of holy wisdom. Saint Augustine said, *“Give me those far away in the desert, who are thirsty and sigh for the spring of the eternal country.”*

Here’s a strange and beautiful story that illustrates this inner journey from the poet Rumi in the 13th century. It speaks of the path we take down into our deepest selves to recover freedom and refreshment.

A caravan of men and camels crossed a desert and reached a place where they expected to find water. Instead they found only a hole going deep into the earth. They lowered a bucket down into the hole, but surprise, up the rope came empty – no bucket and no water! They lowered bucket after bucket into the hole, but each time the rope

came up empty. Finally, the leader of the expedition asked for a man to go down in a bucket, to find the water. They really were desperate and could not go on without water. Down the man went, his eyes wide with terror. Up came the rope, empty again. Several other men were ordered to go down, and some went down screaming in horror. Again, nothing came back up.

Finally, a wise man among the party volunteered to go down in the last remaining bucket. He said his prayers, not sure if this was the last time he would see the sky and life itself, and was lowered down into the dark.

When the wise man reached the bottom of the hole, he found himself face to face with a horrible monster. The man thought to himself, "I can't hope to escape from this place, but I can at least remain aware of everything I am experiencing." The monster said to him, "I will let you go if you answer my question." He answered, "Ask your question then."

The monster said: "Where is the best place to be?"

The wise man thought to himself, "I don't want to hurt his feelings. If I name a beautiful city, he may think I am disparaging his hometown. Or maybe this hole is the place he thinks is best." So, to the monster he said, "The best place to be is wherever you feel at home- even if it's a hole in the ground."

The monster said, "You are so wise that I will not only let you go, but I will also free the foolish men who came down before you. And I will release the water in this well." All were refreshed and renewed.

If we do our inner work of faith: if we face down our fears, our sorrows, our despair, then we return to our true home and discover living water, refreshment, energy, and insight. Through inner work we discover ways to resist sin and to persist in doing good. Through inner work we help others and free them from their bonds. With clarity and conviction, whatever comes our way, we'll be ready. In the months ahead we will truly need this resource.

As we take communion together this morning, let's reclaim the depth and calm within our souls, and rededicate ourselves to the ministry God calls us to create – to release captives, to bind up the broken hearted.

Thanks be to God. Amen.