

Luke 4:21-32

“The times, they are a-changing.” We hear these words rather frequently, and when we do, they usually refer to change that is bad. “Years ago nobody worried about kids getting off the bus; now-a-days you never know who’s watching and waiting. Years ago couples got married and then they lived together; today it’s the other way around. Years ago killing an unborn baby was wrong...period; now it’s perfectly legal.”

The times may be a-changing, but people are not. No matter where you look in history you will find sinners living in a dying world. We may have found new ways to reveal the sin within us, but call it what you want, it’s still sin. Our Epistle reading for today is the chapter on love in First Corinthians. It’s a good thing that God gives this description of love...as patient and kind, not envious or boastful, not self-seeking or proud, because otherwise a world full of sinners would never know what real love is. And God didn’t just describe love to us, He lived that love for us. He came into our dying world and He died for every one of us. And He did this not so much that we would learn how to love, but because we needed loving; we needed forgiving; we needed saving. The good news for you is that the lovelessness of this world could not keep Jesus from doing what He came to do; and the sinfulness in our hearts does not keep Him today from loving you and forgiving you.

The story in Luke 4 helps us to see this so clearly. Jesus came back to Nazareth, His home town. He had had some publicity by this time and the people were anxious to see Him. After reading from the prophet Isaiah where he speaks of the coming Messiah and what that Messiah would do, Jesus told the people, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your ears.” At first everyone spoke well of Him. Nothing negative at all—they were amazed at Him; they marveled at His words. They really hadn’t considered yet, the fact that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah. They had not thought through all the implications of what Jesus was saying.

People today behave in a similar way. Someone may hear of all the privileges that belong to members of the Christian church. A Christian friend may speak to him of the joy and peace that he has as a Christian, and so his first reaction is very positive. After all, who doesn’t want meaning in life? Who doesn’t want a life filled with peace and joy? How comfortable it is to visit a worship service and be received so warmly. How comforting to be assured that, in view of life’s many problems, God is good and gracious to us. The person hasn’t inquired deeply yet, into the significance of believing in Jesus and living for Him. But at first contact, Christianity has made a very positive impression. But, when Jesus makes it look like we don’t deserve God’s favor, people by nature become furious and reject Him.

It happened at Nazareth. First, all spoke well of Him. Not much later they all wanted to kill Him. In between Jesus spoke about Elijah and Elisha and how they helped foreigners rather than the people of Israel. He was, in effect, telling them that God’s people were not worthy of God’s love, and this made them furious. They wanted to hear that God’s kindness toward them was the result of their goodness and obedience. But Jesus was saying that they did not even deserve God’s favor. The people reacted in anger. They turned on Jesus. They drove Him out of town and tried to throw Him off a cliff.

People do the same thing today. When Scripture distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked, the upright and the evil, our sinful flesh immediately urges us to put ourselves into the good category. You and I dislike it when God's Law accuses us and threatens us. And when we're told that God loves us, our first reaction is to think, "Of course He does; after all, I deserve His love more than some people I know." But when the Word of God clearly shows us that we are wicked sinners who do not deserve His favor, we resemble those people in Nazareth, for we too, are tempted to become angry, to stop listening, and to find a way to get rid of Jesus.

But that doesn't stop Jesus. He completes His work of saving us in spite of our rejection of Him. It happened in Nazareth. When Jesus was thrown out of town, He went down to Capernaum and He taught the people there. He did not quit His Messianic mission because He was rejected. He kept teaching, and healing, and making known the Kingdom of God. Eventually He set His face to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die for all people—even the people of Nazareth who had become so furious at Him.

And that is true today. Even though we by nature reject Him, He came into your life and made you His child in Baptism. Even though we still reject Him by our selfish, loveless living, He forgives you. He does not reject you...not ever. He knows nothing but love and mercy for you.

How many times has our arguing, our half-hearted worship, our selfish giving driven Jesus out of this church? And yet, He continues to come and be present with us whenever we call on His Name. He continues to give His body and blood to us and for us. He never complains about our attitude. He is never offended. He just simply keeps on forgiving.

Even the people in Nazareth were forgiven. Jesus didn't say to them, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled...if you accept it" or, "if you obey Me." He said, "It is fulfilled"...period! The good news was for them even though they rejected their Savior.

When a prisoner is released from his prison cell, he is free no matter if he likes his freedom or not. He is free no matter how he feels about the man who released him. He is free because he has been set free. You, friend, are released from sin's prison. Jesus, by His death for you, has set you free. Even if you think that you still belong in prison, you are free in Christ. Even though we reject Jesus by how we live, you are His baptized child and you are set free. No matter what you think of Jesus, He died for you. No matter if you like or dislike your pastor, you are free of all sin—you are forgiven.

We don't deserve this...none of it, but it's yours, now. "Today," says Jesus—"Today, in your ears." Jesus' love for you is not based on what you do. Today...right now His heart is full of love for you. God's forgiveness is not based on how you live. Today...right now He forgives you. And so you and I can go now and leave our life of sin. Today as Jesus' words come into your ears, He comes to live within you freeing you from the power of sin to live for Him.

You don't have to worry about where you will spend eternity. You can have peace and joy in your heart because "Today" Jesus' words of life give you eternal life. Heaven does not come by what we do. It comes through the Living Word of Christ, and that Word is in your ears today.

Now perhaps some may think that we should have a type of altar call here; a time for you and me to come up and make a commitment to Christ; to respond to His good news with a resounding, “Yes, I accept!” But we won’t do that today, or any day—because the power to change is not in our words to God, but in His living words to us. His word of forgiveness is what draws you to Him. His word of grace, which is in your ears, is what works faith in your heart. The power to believe is not in us—it is in the Word that you hear today. And that Word is for you today, tomorrow, and every day of your life. Amen.