

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

GOOD NEWS FOR THE HOMETOWN

Luke 4:14-21

Third Sunday after the Epiphany Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

14Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16When 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, 17and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*18"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,
19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

20And 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. 21Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

DIAGNOSIS: Drowning

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *On Thin Ice*

When the hometown-boy-who-made-good returns to Nazareth to preach to his home congregation, he has got to be careful what he says. He can't brag or scold too much because sitting there are all the guys that he used to hang out with. They know too much about him and his past to take him too seriously. If Jesus was not only fully divine but also fully human, then there were those in Nazareth who knew all about his struggles with being human and growing up, including a runny nose, a messy diaper, and some teenaged angst (cf. Jesus' spat with his mother in the temple in the Gospel of a few weeks ago). Jesus, the quintessential hometown-boy-made-good, must choose his words carefully if the hometown folks are going to listen to him.

Likewise, the guys he used to hang out with are afraid that Jesus will remember too much about them and their days of growing up together in a small town. They are hoping that the celebrity will only remember the best about them and not drag out their "dirty underwear."

As an emerging star, maybe he will grant them a few privileges, perhaps some free tickets to his next healing or at least an autograph or two.

Both Jesus and his hometown buddies are concerned about how each is going to come across to the other. Both are walking on thin ice afraid that it might crack, give way and the icy water below swallow them up.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Cracking Ice*

When Jesus announces that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah 61, the messiah who will finally usher in the Kingdom and will set

right everything that is wrong with this world, the folks in the synagogue must have rolled their eyes in disbelief. When they gave Jesus the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, they expected Jesus to act like a prophet and give them directions on how to get right with God and the instructions on how to fix the world. Jesus will show them how to put their enemies in their place and reward them with the status they have long deserved.

However, Jesus catches them off guard. He does not give them a program or tell them what to do. Instead he tells them WHAT HE IS GOING TO DO! He is the One for whom everyone has been waiting. He is the One who is going to set everything right.

You can hear the ice cracking. Who is going to fall through the ice first? Jesus, for being a messianic pretender? Or, his old friends from the neighborhood for refusing to believe that Jesus is the messiah?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Drowning*

Next week the lectionary reveals the reaction of the hometown folks to Jesus' announcement. When Jesus makes it clear that being the messiah means that he is the friend of sinners, that being the messiah is not about getting-back-and-getting-even and that the messiah welcomes even gentiles, they'd had enough! The ice had broken. They wanted to drown Jesus in their righteous anger and kill him. Jesus escapes.

However, if Jesus' claims are true, the hometown is in trouble, as are the rest of us who disbelieve Jesus' stunning claim. Thumbing our nose at God and insisting that we know better means that we will all eventually crash through the ice and drown in God's judgment.

PROGNOSIS: Rescued

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Today!*

Jesus continues to defy conventional understandings of the messiah. Jesus does not take revenge and refuses to get-back-and-get-even with his enemies. He could have had fire rain on his hometown with the way they treated him. He refuses and walks away. He furthers his messianic mission by continuing to seek out those who have fallen through the ice and rescues them. He befriends the poor, the sick, Samaritans, lepers and just about any kind of outcast you can think of—even his enemies! He would go out to dinner with culprits that any decent person would never let in the door. Determined to bring good news to the oppressed and freedom to the captive, he dives into the icy cold waters of being an outcast.

If you are known by the company you keep, then Jesus became a sinner. If that was all he had done, he could have been ignored as just another criminal. However, when Jesus claims that God has sent him to do this, he crossed the line. His critics insisted that it would cost him to disagree with God like this. Jesus managed to evade the mob and get out of town alive. But eventually, in order to silence him, the rich, the powerful and the custodians of God's law put him on a cross. Surprisingly, even there he refused to strike back at his enemies. He forgave them.

Jesus seemed like a fool. The ice cracked. He fell through and drowned. God's law condemns sinners and that included Jesus. He died chief of sinners. However, "on the third day" God plucked Jesus out of the icy waters of death. It was God's marvelous way to love the world and silence the criticism of God's own judgment. It was God's way to tell the world that Jesus told the truth that day in Nazareth when he audaciously declared, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Hearing the Good News*

The folks back home should have been shaking in their shoes when it became clear how wrong they had been that day when they drove Jesus out of the synagogue. If they had not already fallen through the ice, it would soon happen. We too shudder when we think of Jesus showing up knowing all about the embarrassing skeletons we want to keep hidden. But Jesus surprises us by standing in our midst, not demanding to get even but instead offering us forgiveness.

He has come to “proclaim good news to the poor, ... release to the captive, ... and let the oppressed go free.”

When we realize that this good news is for us, the embarrassment, shame and anger disappear. We rejoice, as we are snatched out of the icy cold waters. We breathe a sigh of relief knowing how undeserved this fate is. “The year of the Lord’s favor” has come unexpectedly to the same hometown folks who had turned on him. The same blessing is ours. God will not hold our rejection of Jesus against us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Sent as the Body of Christ*

Trusting that promise changes everything. Anointed by God’s Spirit, we become the very body we once despised. Sent to be the body of Christ we continue Jesus’ work of setting the captive free (cf. Paul in today’s Second Reading). Even in our hometown, regardless of what they might know about us, we are Jesus extending a helping hand and proclaiming the arrival of “the year of the Lord’s favor.” We are messiahs anointed by God to bring “good news to the poor,... proclaim release to the captives ... and the recovery of sight to the blind.” We are epiphanies of Jesus’ messianic mission.