

SERMON
February 3, 2019
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

Luke 4: 21-30

One to the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation desires. They end up sleeping through a revolution.

New attitudes. New responses that new situations require. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached these words from the pulpit at the National Cathedral one week before he was assassinated. “Wake up! he was saying. “Wake up, for the times they are a changin’”—to quote another prophet from his era. Luke, in today’s Gospel says the same thing—“Wake up!”

Luke tells a story — that’s what a Gospel is—to his congregation, a congregation mostly of gentiles. Luke is traditionally thought of as one of Paul's traveling companions and it’s more than likely that the early community for which he wrote was a community from one of those Greek cities in which Paul had worked. Perhaps Paul established the community, but now there were second and third generation members. They needed a certain kind of wake-up call. So Luke writes his Gospel with angels singing from on high! A wild and crazy star leads a caravan of kings and princes from the East! Mary and her cousin Elizabeth sing songs about their hero sons! Herod, the Darth Vader of his day, kills innocent children in order to stop the unfolding of history which was not to be in his favor. Wake up, readers. Wake up!

It took me years to figure out how to wake up my teenager son in the morning, in time for school. It wasn’t until his senior year that I discovered that a glass of orange juice brought to him while he was still in bed would do the trick. One gulp and he was up-and-at-it! This is what Luke’s Gospel is trying to do—to wake up a generation living through great social changes. His task was to wake them up so they would not sleep through the revolution.

Under the leadership of the Right Reverend Michael Curry—the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church—this revolution to which we have been invited is called “The Jesus Movement.”

Loving. Liberating. Life-giving.

The Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement.

He writes,

With God. With Each Other. With Creation. In Christ, God invites us to share that love; wherever there is pain or alienation, God longs to knit all people and creation back into wholeness and relationship.

It’s the same movement Luke put into that glass of orange juice. Jesus opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read—

*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.

The people of Nazareth loved what they heard. Good News. Release. Sight. Freedom. Divine Favor. They were amazed. Right here in Nazareth! Hometown kid hits homerun! But then, the news of it all began to sink in. It was not about them. There was no preferential treatment. It was about everyone. No one excluded. And they began to get nervous. No favorites? Jesus said, “Wake up! This is how God loves and this is what God calls us to do.”

There is a revolution going on—not with guns and force, but with boundary-breaking love. It’s been going on for a long time and it will continue in this generation and the next. Boundary-breaking is not a new approach to faith, then or now. But there will always those who prefer a

more rigid and exclusive form of religious practice because it seems safer and with more controls and guarantees. But that is not what Jesus found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. There he found the manifesto for a new world! God is moving, he said. God is not trapped in dogmas and doctrines. “Come with me into a nuanced, experiential, paradoxical, mystical and relational way of faith and spirituality.” Well, actually, he didn’t say it in those twenty-first century words. But he did show them that faith was relevant to their lives, down-to-earth, and real. Twenty centuries later, Paul Tillich said it this way:

*Being religious means asking passionately
the questions of the meaning of our existence
and being willing to receive answers,
even if the answers hurt.”*

The people of Nazareth didn’t like what Jesus was describing. Nobody wants the status-quo upset. Nobody wants pain. They were enraged. We are told, that they tried to throw him off a cliff! But Jesus slipped between the crowd and moved on. That’s what God does when we choose not to get onboard. He slips through and moves on. The point that Jesus was making when the crowd got so angry—when he told them about the poor non-Jewish widow and the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian—is that God loves everyone, maybe especially the outsiders. Maybe we’ve heard this in our own political struggles. Maybe it stings to hear this. Maybe it makes some people angry. It seems that every week in the news there is another challenge that faces us. There is something afoot. A movement. A revolution. And there are people who are reeling from the pain. Is it about walls? Is it about immigration? Assimilation? “Assimilation” is an incendiary word for many people. Assimilation to what? Is it about our learning to respect the dignity of every human being? Is it about loving your neighbor has yourself? Is it about how difficult it can be to proclaim by word AND EXAMPLE the Good News of God in Christ? What are the personal costs of striving for justice and peace?

In the baptismal service we answer these questions with the words, “I will, with God’s help.” A revolution is never easy. “I will, with God’s help.” I will wake up and be part of God’s

Loving. Liberating. Life-giving movement. We are getting ready to welcome Ann and Andy and their son Thomas this morning through baptism and the reaffirmation of faith. Like the rest of us, each day is a new discover of faith, a new chapter. Baptism doesn't give us answers to all the questions but it does include us in God's movement. Each of us is already a CHILD OF GOD. This is not what we are accomplishing today. Rather, baptism is like a WAKING UP! Waking up and being part of God's loving, liberating and life-giving movement—a nuanced, experiential, paradoxical, mystical and relational way of faith and spirituality.

So how do we get out of bed each day, and into this movement? Where do we start? How do we start? To you, Ann and Andy and Thomas— to us all, Here's the best I've got—it is from Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book, "Made for Goodness."

Listen to God speak with the voice of the heart.

Don't struggle and strive so, my child.

There is no race to complete, no point to prove,
no obstacle course to conquer for you to win my love.

I have already given it to you.

I loved you before creation drew its first breath.

I dreamed you as I molded Adam from the mud.

I saw you wet from the womb.

And I loved you then.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Stop racing ahead at your own pace;
you will only be exhausted, flamed out,
and spent before the task is accomplished.

Pace yourself with me; walk alongside me.

Do you think I don't know the demands of your life?

I see you striving for perfection, craving my acceptance.

I see you bending yourself out of shape

to conform to the image that you have of me.

Do you imagine that I did not know who you were when I made you,
when I knit you together in your mother's womb?

Do you think I planted a fig tree and expected roses to bloom?

No child.

I sowed what I wanted to reap.

You are a child after my own heart.

Seek out your deepest joy and you will find me there.

Find that which makes you most perfectly yourself
and know that I am at the heart of it.

Do what delights you

And you will be working with me.

Walking with me.

Finding your life Hidden in me.

Ask me any question.

My answer is love.

When you want to hear my voice,

Listen for love.

How can you delight me?

I will tell you:

Love.

The tough, unbreakable, unshakable love.

Are you looking for me?
You will find me in love.
Would you know my secrets?
There is only one: Love.
Do you want to know me?
Seek and serve love.”

Seek and serve love. It’s revolutionary. Let us welcome all people into the household of God and insure that each knows — that everyone knows and receives — the liberating, life-giving love of God.

AMEN.