

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*January 30, 2022*

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## **Fight, Flight, or Follow**

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week Pastor Larsen reminded us of the importance of engaging with God's Word. As Christians we are called to regularly engage with God's Word in scripture, in the sacraments, and in one another. We understand that engaging in God's Word will mean that God's Word will lay claims on us and on how we live our lives. This can be a scary thought!

Why is it a scary thought? It means giving up some control and power over our own lives. And that's something we're typically not very comfortable with. We see this on display clear as day in our Gospel text today. The people of Nazareth certainly didn't appreciate this message of God's unconditional love and grace. And what boggles my mind is how stubborn people can be on this point! God has been sending prophets and messengers of all sorts, from divine beings, to weirdos like John the Baptizer; all with the same message: God loves the poor, the orphan, the resident alien, and the widow; so you should too! God loves all people and you should too!

So when Jesus comes along with the same message (backed by far more authority than any other messenger or prophet before him), you'd think it wouldn't come as a total shock and surprise to the people. Jesus even points this out, raising the stories of God extending love and grace to outsiders like the poor widow of Zarephath and Namaan the Syrian. But no, the people of Nazareth stubbornly hold on to their own understanding of who God loves and who God doesn't. Jesus preaches a message of unconditional love and grace that simply doesn't allow us to exclude others from receiving it, and we don't like that!

We still struggle with this stubbornness today! We have all of Scripture telling us that God's priority is for the least and lowly among us. We have

all of Scripture telling us that God's love and grace are for all people. We have all of Scripture calling us to love and serve our neighbors. And yet...looking at the world around us...we're still stubbornly holding on to the belief that some are "worthy" of love and grace, and some are not.

We see where this stubbornness gets the people of Nazareth. They encounter the Word of God in Jesus Christ and they react to it with anger and consternation. Jesus confronts them, in particular their intolerance and dismissal of outsiders, and they clearly move into fight or flight mode, landing on the fight reaction. This word about the expansiveness of God's love and grace is too radical for them and they decide to remove the messenger in the hopes that it will stop the message once and for all. The people of Nazareth fail to throw Jesus off the cliff, but the forces of evil will still seek Christ's death.

Ultimately those forces will succeed...briefly. On the cross evil seems to win. Intolerance and exclusion seem to win. Power and wealth, the gods of most of the world, seem to win. But the empty tomb belies that victory. The empty tomb begins the downfall of those forces of intolerance and oppression; a downfall that will culminate in the new creation. The empty tomb shows us the Way of Jesus Christ, a Way dedicated to self-sacrificial service to the Gospel. And what is the Gospel if not the message of God's love and grace extended to all people? Extended to the entire cosmos, to borrow terminology from John.

The people of Nazareth...and us still today, face what appears to be a choice. An encounter with God's Word of love and grace **will** elicit a response in us. What will it be? And can we overcome the initial response and move to respond differently? These are the key questions of discipleship. When God's Word makes a claim on your life, how will you respond? Will you fight it? Hanging on to the illusion of control over our own lives, and the illusion of control over who God loves and doesn't. Will you flee from it as so many who encounter the Word do? Flee like the rich young ruler did when he heard that wealth gets in the way of faith<sup>1</sup>? Will we flee like countless others, into myopic, little lives that ignore the persistent message of God inviting us to the "still more excellent way"<sup>2</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:18-30 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:31b (NRSV)

Or will we follow? Will we give in to the claim made on us by God's Word? Are we willing to set aside our priorities and truly mean it when we pray "**your** kingdom come, **your** will be done."<sup>3</sup>

I hope I can guess what your answer to this question is. I hope that your desire is to respond by following when God's Word makes a claim on us. But I know it's hard. It's really, really, hard! Which allows us to circle back around to the promise of God's Word. That despite following being so hard for us, we are constantly forgiven when we fail, that's grace. Despite our fight and flight responses to God's Word, it comes to us again and again with a stubbornness that is even greater than our own, that's love!

We can prime ourselves to respond by following if we're willing to do the work necessary. Richard Rohr, in his book "just this" gives us a lesson on being receptive to the claims God's Word makes on us:

"The Zen Buddhist masters tell us we need to 'wipe the mirror' of our minds and hearts in order to see what's there without our distortions, or even our explanations – not what we're afraid is there, nor what we wish were there, but what is *actually* there. That is what a true mirror does and thus offers 'perfect freedom' (see James 1:23-25).

Mirror-wiping is the inner discipline of calmly observing our own patterns – what we see and what we don't – in order to get our demanding and over-defended egos away from the full control they always want. It requires us to stand at a distance from ourselves and listen and look with calm, nonjudgemental objectivity. Otherwise, we do not *have* thoughts and feelings; *the thoughts and feelings have us!*"<sup>4</sup>

In a very real way the Holy Spirit is in a constant battle with our egos. And it is our egos that lead us to fight or flight. If we truly wish to follow the Way of Christ we have to learn to let go of those egos...or perhaps, sacrifice them. I would argue that it is our ego that is the chaff that Christ will burn from the threshing floor of our lives. God's Word makes claims on us, but our egos hate those claims. To truly live out our calling to serve the Gospel we must join the Holy Spirit's battle against our egos and surrender to God's Word and Will.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:9-13 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> Rohr, R. (2018). wiping the mirror. In *Just this: Prompts and practices for contemplation* (p. 34). SPCK, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

How is God's Word making a claim on your life today? What are you being called to say or do? Will you follow in the Way of Christ? Even though it means setting aside your own ego for the sake of God and neighbor? It's hard to follow, but this Way leads to something amazing. It leads to reconciliation, it leads to peace, it leads to justice, it leads to the Kingdom of God. May we walk this Way, loving and serving others. May we include the widows of Zarephath and Namaan. May we respond to violence with love. May we find our true selves, the selves that rest in God and not in ego. Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson