

**Sunday, February 3 and Wednesday, February 6, 2019**  
**Third Sunday after the Epiphany + Luke 4:21-30, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13**  
**“Signs of Love”**

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI  
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Some years ago, the great preacher William Willemon asked various groups of people, “What do you hope to get out of a sermon?” The answers went like this:

- *I like a sermon that helps me think about a biblical passage in a new and fresh way.*
- *I think a sermon ought to point out ways that I can get my life back on track.*
- *I want inspiration from a sermon, a feeling that I have been taken to a higher place or have been given a special feeling as a result of the sermon.*
- *To me, the best sermons are those that give me something that’s easy to remember, something I can take home with me.*

In today’s Gospel Jesus has returned to his home town of Nazareth and is preaching his first sermon. At first the people are amazed to hear this mere carpenter’s son speak so graciously. They may have been hoping for many of the same things--momentary inspiration, a bit of life coaching, a few new insights into scripture.

But Jesus apparently failed to satisfy their expectations. Whatever they were hoping for, Jesus did not give it to them. So they flew into a rage. Not only did they rise up and storm out, but they herded Jesus into the midst of a mob and tried to kill him. What drove them to that?

Bitterly disappointed expectations. Look at how our reading begins today. It repeats the final verse of last week’s Gospel reading in which Jesus tells them “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus has just told them that he was

anointed to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim release to the captives. In all likelihood, the people heard his as a mild-mannered metaphor. A figure of speech telling them that God is paying attention to their needs. Something they can remember and take home with them.

But Jesus doesn't stop. In fact, he's just getting started. His next move is to use two of the people's great prophets to point out that God's work is not specifically directed at God's chosen people. Rather, God aims at the margins of society or even outside the boundaries of the culture. Jesus points out that God sent Elijah and Elisha to people in other cultures where idols were worshiped. In the time of Elijah, many Jewish widows were starving during the great famine, he says, but Elijah was sent only to a Gentile widow in Sidon. In the time of Elisha, many Jewish people suffered from leprosy, but Elisha was sent only to cure Naaman, a Gentile in Syria.

The way Jesus presets this is abhorrent to the congregation. They've been waiting hundreds or maybe thousands of years for the Messiah, and now they hear he's not coming for them at all. Jesus might have gone on to explain this, but they've lost their patience. What did those outsiders do to warrant the benefit of God's healing power? Didn't *they* deserve God's undivided attention?

Expectation was their downfall. Not only were they God's chosen people, but they expected special blessings as Jesus' hometown people. Instead, all they get is a troublemaker—one who annoys them further by telling them what critical thoughts were beginning to form in their minds, then by attacking them for those thoughts even before

they were fully formed. “Physician, heal thyself” – that is, if you have such great powers, why aren’t you king of the world?

I think Jesus is purposely being difficult. He’s deliberately calling attention to the gulf between their ideas about who God is and what God is actually doing. Like the Pharisees parading around in their long flowing robes, the people of Nazareth expected Jesus to reward them. Instead, it felt as if they were being trampled on. The easiest solution was to get rid of the problem. So they ran him to the edge of the cliff, but then imagine their rage exponentially increasing when he turns, calmly walks through their midst, and goes on his way.

When we come to church, don’t we bring in expectations of who we think God is? We know that God is love, and from Paul today we hear that love is patient and kind. So perhaps we think of God as a kindly parent. Always there for us. Helping us out. Cheering us on. Trying to untangle our knots of confusion. Waiting patiently for us to come around.

But the love that Paul is talking about in this famous passage from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is not merely a moral obligation, but a matter of life and death. The young church in Corinth that was falling prey to the surrounding culture of immorality. This Roman city was infamous for loose and profligate living. Even temple worship was grossly immoral; apparently the 1,000 priestesses assigned to the Corinthian temple were actually all prostitutes. So the young Christian church in Corinth had become dangerously divided. Paul is begging them to return to God in Christ and to the message of the cross--that the

proud are cast down, the lowly lifted up, and that death no longer has the last word but always yields to new life.

God *is* love, but this love is not the soft glow of candlelight. Rather, it is a cosmic force whose essence is *compassion*—that word meaning, literally, “suffering with.” God loves us so much that he sent his Son into the world to suffer with us, to be with us in all our brokenness, to comfort us in our desolate places with the promise that he will never forsake us but will always bring us into new life. To trust this promise we must let go of preconceived notions of who God is, what we think God should be doing and what we think we deserve. This letting-go allows the Holy Spirit to act in our lives in radical and earthshaking ways.

The clue that this must be so is that God comes to those who least expect it. The four Gospels are filled with examples, but consider the two Jesus mentions in his sermon. God sent Elijah to the widow at Zarephath in 1 Kings 17 with the instruction that she would provide him with food. But when he arrived looking for a meal, she admitted that had only enough to flour and oil make a meager last meal for herself and her son before laying down to die. So through Elijah, God made sure her jar of flour and jug of oil were filled to overflowing from that day on. New life.

To heal Naaman of his leprosy in 2 Kings 5, Elisha ordered him to wash seven times in the Jordan River. At first Naaman this was way too much trouble – why wasn’t once enough? But his servants persuaded him to follow Elisha’s orders, and he was cured. New life.

In Jesus, God is doing a new thing. The laws of God's kingdom reverse those of the world. Good news *has* come to the poor: Eternal life in Christ is ours, every day and forever. The captives *are* released—no chains can keep the human heart from knowing God and being known in return.

God's grace knows no earthly bounds. Signs of life are all around us. Look for them where you would least expect.

Amen.