

Sunday, January 27, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Most Likely to Succeed”

The lectionary passage for today stops right in the middle of the story.

Jesus has spoken in his hometown synagogue and we are told what he said, but for some reason, how the crowd responds is saved for next week’s reading.

So today we will focus on what Jesus said, as well as the how and why.

Jesus has been travelling around Galilee, preaching in neighboring towns, prior to arriving in Nazareth.

We don’t have a record of what he said in those other towns, only that word of him has spread.

Today’s reading is recorded as Jesus’ first opportunity to publicly declare himself, often called his ‘Inaugural Sermon.’

He chooses to read from the prophet Isaiah – to define his platform.

This is language that was familiar to his congregation.

The people with whom he was speaking knew the book of Isaiah and the promises it held.

Initially, this is a friendly audience – his hometown synagogue.

It is here that he likely studied the lessons of Isaiah – here that he may have begun to sense a calling, a feeling that he was different than other students.

He comes home to declare, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

He is quite certain that he is the one who has been anointed.

This public declaration seems like a bold move, but these are the people who have known Jesus all of his life.

Perhaps they always knew he was something special, though they couldn’t define what it was.

When someone is filled with the Holy Spirit – it usually shows.

Today’s events were not necessarily transformative – they may have simply been cumulative.

I remember going to my son’s sixth grade parent teacher conference. The teacher was trying to warn Joe and I about a troublemaker whom my son had befriended.

She was trying to be diplomatic.

I finally said, “What are you trying to say?”

She said, “Well, as educators, we can often tell by third grade who will get into trouble in high school and this boy could be trouble.”

I asked her if they were also able to identify the children who would succeed and she assured me they could.

I wonder what it was like to grow up in the neighborhood with Jesus.

Did the other mothers compare their sons to Mary’s boy?

Did the teachers talk about him?

Was he particularly well behaved, polite, intelligent?

Was he the one they dubbed, “most likely to succeed?”

We know so little about Jesus’ youth, but we can look at what we do know and understand how he came to the point where he could publicly declare that he was the long promised messiah.

First, we can look to Jesus’ mother, Mary.

When Mary found out that she was to bear the Son of God her words of praise laid out her beliefs.

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things.”

Jesus was raised in a home where belief was in a loving God who sided with the marginalized and oppressed.

The seeds of his ministry were sown in the prayers and songs of his mother.

Next we can think about Jesus who, at age 12, was seeking counsel in the temples of Jerusalem.

It was there that his parents found him, asking questions, interpreting scripture, entering into dialogue with the rabbis.

He was a young man who both studied and thought about God’s holy word.

Our next event is the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River.

We are told that when he emerged from the water a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

That is affirmation that builds confidence.

All of this is followed by forty days in the wilderness wrestling with the devil.

Jesus is confronted at least three times and each time he prevails by citing scripture that keeps him from succumbing to temptation.

His ability to cope with temptation was rooted in the practice of his faith.

So...his mother taught him to care about other people.

His rabbis told him that he was really smart.

His heavenly Father told him that he was the Beloved.

He likely told himself that he was pretty strong to be able to resist the devil.

Why shouldn't he declare that he was the anointed one of which Isaiah had written?

I think that there are three important lessons for us in this story.

The first is that we are a compilation of our life experiences.

Each person with whom we have had contact has had some impact on us.

Our parents, our teachers, our neighbors, our friends all touch us in some way.

Their imprint is upon us.

We bring to adulthood all of the experiences that we have had along the way.

Each lesson learned is a seed planted that will flourish at some later time.

Though we often endeavor to leave our pasts behind, we are still the people we are because of those pasts.

It is important that we honor our own lives and those who have influenced us, good or bad, for they have made us unique.

The second lesson is that we must use our gifts to build the Kingdom of God.

Jesus recognized that he was the one anointed to carry out this work and he did not shy away from it – all the way to the cross.

He accepted that his purpose in life was “to bring the good news to the poor, 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.”

Scientist Marie Curie said, “We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained.”

Jesus embodied this philosophy.

We must discern our own purpose in life and then build our lives around that purpose.

Each day we must ask ourselves, “Why are we here and what can we do to bring God’s reign near?”

The third lesson is that the Holy Spirit is alive and well and moving among us.

Three times in this narrative Luke tells us that Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit-filled with the power of the Spirit.

This is God’s greatest gift to us.

We, too, are filled with the Holy Spirit, the power to live our lives in such a way that God’s light shines through us.

It is the Holy Spirit that empowers us to love God with our whole heart and to live out that love in community.

Earlier we heard James’ story of his own work – answering God’s call and endeavoring to bring God’s love and justice to the people of Argentina and Paraguay.

Here we have a living example of the Holy Spirit guiding and supporting the life of this young man.

What about you?

In what ways do the lessons of your life translate into holy work?

How do you manifest the power of the Holy Spirit in community?

In today’s gospel Jesus stands boldly in the center of his community and proclaims, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

He is undeterred by what the response might be.

Next week we will find out what that response was, but for now, ask yourself if you are bold enough to stand up in the middle of your community and proclaim your purpose in life.

I invite you to take some time this week to reflect on what your inaugural speech might sound like?

I will look forward to hearing it.