

One of my favorite parts of my job as a pastor is that every week, I consider a passage of scripture all week long. On Monday, I start mulling over the passage for the following Sunday, and usually I have things in place by Thursday for my sermon. But you never know what might come along that might bring insight to that week's scripture reading. Yesterday, something happened that completely changed this sermon. Asher took an online class on how to be a dungeon master in the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons. If you don't know, Dungeons and Dragons is a game where players create fantasy characters to participate in adventures together, and the Dungeon master is the god-like storyteller who creates the scenarios the players engage with, and everyone works cooperatively to tell a great story. In his class, Asher learned that to tell a great story, Dungeon masters must always remember that they are fundamentally on the players side, but you can't give the players everything they want. Part of being a good dungeon master is creating challenges for the players to overcome. If players always got what they wanted, there would be no story. And in order to tell a great story together, the players must trust that in whatever frustrations they face, the dungeon master always remains on their side. In today's reading, we see what can happen when we forget about the goodness of the storyteller.

Last week, we heard Jesus preach his first sermon. He went to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and read from the Isaiah scroll that he has been anointed by God's Spirit to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed, and everyone in the synagogue loved it! The Big Table of God's grace has come for them. Luke says, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'" The hometown boy is making good, and they are proud of him. Nazareth is a small country town where everybody saw Jesus grow up. They know Mary. They knew Joseph, so when Jesus reads like a Rabbi and tells them the time of God's favor is now, they couldn't help but be proud. Is UA proud of Jack Nicklaus, Chris Spielman, Woody Hayes, Jim Tressel, and Jenni Britton Bauer? Of course, you are. For a small town like Nazareth, Jesus' neighbors are beaming.

At least they are at first. But things turn rather quickly in this story, don't they? In reading it again this week, I thought of that scene in Anchorman where all the local news teams violently brawl with each other, and afterwards, Ron Burgundy says, "Boy, that escalated quickly." How do the people of Nazareth turn from proud neighbors in one moment, to murderous rage in the next? How are we to make sense of it?

What surprised me most going back to this story is the way Jesus provokes the crowd:

"Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

Having spoken gracious words to them of God's favor—how he's come to bless the poor and free the oppressed—Jesus presumes they think he's come to do these things for them. And why shouldn't they assume that? After all, they are poor, country folk, who live under the boot of the Empire. If Jesus has come to bring good news Jesus and healing, they sure could use it. But for some reason, Jesus says they are not going to get what they want, because no prophet is

accepted in their hometown. That is key to this whole story. Jesus claims for himself the role of prophet, and they he reminds them of two stories of Israel's prophets from old. He says:

But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.

This is what sets them off. Luke says, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage." Why do you think they so offended? In these two stories, Israel's prophets brought divine blessings to outsiders, while many of Israel's insiders were suffering. Elijah brought food to a widow in Sidon, while the rest of Israel received nothing from him. That alone may be hurtful, but what's worse is that Sidon was not Israel's friend. They were considered by many to be a hostile enemy, yet for some reason, Elijah blessed this widow. Jesus' second example is even worse. Elisha heals Naaman the Syrian who was a military foe who kept an Israelite slave. Yet Elisha blessed this enemy, leaving many lepers in Israel unhealed. And for some reason, the people in Nazareth didn't like these stories. I wonder why?

Now, we have to be very careful here. This story is often told an example of how Jews hated Gentiles, and the people of Nazareth would rather kill Jesus than imagine God blessing a Gentile. Christians like to assume Jews didn't understand anything about a loving a gracious God, but that's both false and anti-Semitic. With anti-Semitism on the rise in our country, we need to be as clear as we can about these things. Jews knew their scriptures spoke of God being gracious to Gentiles. That's not why they are angry. They are angry because they understand that Jesus is a prophet who can bless and heal them, but for some reason he is refusing to do so. The dungeon master is not giving them what they want. They feel abandoned and betrayed, and their adulation turns to rage. They forget the fundamental goodness of the storyteller.

The people are scandalized by his unwillingness to bless them, and they drive Jesus out of town and attempt to throw him off a cliff, but thankfully, he gets away, because the story is not over yet. Now, the crowd's response may seem disproportionate, and it is, but how do you respond when you feel abandoned and betrayed? The people who came that day didn't imagine they would participate in a lynch mob, but it happened. And lest we think we are better than them, just over a year ago, we witnessed a group of people violently storm the Capital, in the name of God and country, calling for the lynching of the Vice President whom they had previously admired. Admiration can turn violent when a group feels betrayed, even if the betrayal is a delusion. If we go to the other side of the aisle, how often do we see people who've been previously admired say one wrong thing and get excoriated by an online mob, certain they are on the so-called "right side of history"? If we hear this story from Luke 4 and think, how could anyone do this, then we are not looking closely enough at our own propensity for violence. In a severe act of mercy, Jesus draws out all our rage, all our feelings of abandonment into the open, so that they might be healed. We can't be healed of until we know we're sick, and many of us are sicker than we realize.

When we feel abandoned and betrayed, we turn to rage faster than we'd like to admit. When we see other people receive blessings that we want for ourselves, instead of celebrating,

we become envious, and envy left unchecked turns to violence. While most of us have not participated in mob violence, I suspect we all experience envy over not getting what we want. Jesus invites us to see the darker parts of ourselves, acknowledge they are there, and turn to God for healing.

Healing comes when we learn to trust in the goodness of God, the great storyteller, even when we don't get what we want, even when other people receive the blessings we want for ourselves. Regardless of what frustrations and disappointments come our way, God is always on our side. Instead of becoming resentful in our disappointments, can we remember that the story isn't over yet, so let's keep playing. After all, the only reason we become envious when someone else has what we want is because we think they are separate from us. But if we can somehow remember that we are in this story together, then their blessing is our blessing, and our pain is their pain. The other person being blessed is also one of us, so why not rejoice in their blessing? The good news is that in all our disappointments, there remains a great storyteller who is forever on our side. Of course, we don't always get what we want, and that's good. If we did, there would be no story. Trust the goodness of the storyteller, for God's mercy is wider and kinder than we imagine.