3rd Sunday after Epiphany – January 26, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 4:14-21 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, IL

I am going to take the liberty now of reading nine more verses of the Gospel reading that we would be getting next week if we weren't celebrating the Presentation of Our Lord, because for the purposes of my sermon I don't want you to miss what happened after Jesus dropped the mic in today's reading:

> 21 Then [Jesus] began to say to [all in the synagogue in Nazareth,] "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your
> hearing." 22 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?" 23 He said to them, "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.' " 24 And he said,
> "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 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; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also
> many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the
> Syrian." 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town,
> and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30 But he
> passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I was looking through some of my past sermons on the readings for today and noticed that six years ago I chose to focus on our second reading from 1 Corinthians where Paul continues last week's reading about the church as a body composed of many members but all animated by the same Holy Spirit. And since the that second reading is a continuation of last week's second reading, and they are really a single reading, I talked about them together. And my driving concern was discerning just what spirit was animating our American church, especially the versions of Christianity that so easily conflate American nationalism with the Christian faith, as if the United States was God's new chosen people, and as if Jesus' words about care for the poor and the stranger had never been spoken. And I suggested that that version of the church seem to me to be analogous to Mary Shelly's classic novel Frankenstein. You know the story. Dr. Frankenstein pieces together parts of different corpses into one body and brings it to life with science. Frankenstein succeeded in animating something that looked and acted vaguely human, but it was really a monster that was not possessed of a human spirit, and that monster destroyed his life and everything he loved. I said then that Christian nationalism is that kind of spirit that threatens to make the church a monster devoid of the Holy Spirt. That is clear to me. And I expect that that is not a controversial opinion in this room.

But I also think that there is danger from a direction that is more comfortable to many of us that would have the church influence the state in a way that is the polar opposite of Christian nationalism, a way that strives to make the laws and policies of our country more compassionate to the poor and to refugees and other marginalized people. And while I might agree personally with influencing my government in that direction, and I intent to do so as a concerned citizen, what I am more and more skeptical of is the role of the church as the church in that effort. And the reason I'm skeptical is that I don't think the reign of God and the reign of humans are compatible on this side of Christ's return, and I think it weakens and distorts our message to assume that they are. The interests of the church and the interests of the state do not align.

I think that that conviction is backed up by our Gospel reading this morning, which is often referred to by biblical scholars and pastors as Jesus' inaugural address, because it is his first public appearance after his baptism and his 40 days being tempted in the wilderness. The fact that this reading falls so close to the inauguration of the president of the United States is not, as far as I know, intentional. But it does help us to contrast the nature of God's rule with the way we humans

attempt to rule the world. And it should do that for us in every election cycle, no matter which candidate and which political party is coming to power.

It might not be immediately obvious on first reading, but Jesus is putting himself forth here as an *alternative* to the rulers of this world, to the powers that be and the systems as they work now. When he says that this prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled in their hearing, he is in fact claiming kingship. That's what it meant to say that that God has anointed him. But we need to be as clear as we can be that Jesus is not just another political actor. His rule is a different kind of rule. That should be obvious to us when we read this Gospel reading if we bear in mind what just happened at the beginning of this 4th chapter of Luke. Jesus makes this inaugural address having just refused the devil's temptation to rule over the nations of the world the way we rule them. Jesus will not rule by executive order, what Martin Luther called the power of the sword. He will not rule by coercively imposing his will on others. But let's also be clear that that does not make his rule merely one of thoughts and prayers in the face of the evil that others face. What Jesus promises is good news for the poor and the sick and the outcasts. And it is also bad news for the rich and the powerful, or at least it will be *perceived* as bad news by the rich and powerful, because Jesus' reign *is* about turning the world upside down.

The central task of the church is to proclaim over and over the reign of Christ that is already, right now, at work in the world, being fulfilled in our hearing. Our challenge as Christians – and it is a *real challenge* – is to trust that our proclamation is true, even and especially when there seems to be little evidence to support that claim - even and especially when our promised king is hanging on a cross, brutalized and executed by the powers of this world that rebel against God.

It is also a challenge to trust the proclamation of the reign of Christ because that message brings backlash. The crowd that Jesus preached to at his inauguration was initially impressed with the power of his proclamation, how well-spoken he was. But when the substance of what he was saying began to sink in, when it looked like good news for the wrong sorts of people, they mocked him. And when Jesus pushed back with the history of God's care for those they despised, when the faith of foreigners was contrasted with the faithlessness of those who prided themselves in being God's chosen, then they were out for blood. If you take seriously the proclamation of Jesus' reign and recognize its implications for yourself, you too might find yourself being one of those lashing back. You too might find that you are out for blood.

But as I said yesterday at Roger Yarbrough's funeral, God does not give up on those whom God has claimed, even when we aid and abet evil, even when we betray and deny our Lord and make ourselves God's enemies. Jesus instead bears the consequences of our sin and gives us the blood we are out for, poured out for us and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.

And when by God's grace we take *that* part of the message to heart, the message of God's forgiveness and love, then we will be active in our concern for the neighbor, especially the marginalized and vulnerable ones. We will speak out on their behalf, calling for mercy and compassion, and we will endure the backlash that is sure to come. But we will also, against our natural instincts, be drawn to care about those who are lashing back and inflicting harm, for whom Jesus also died.

Dear people of God, the reign of God is happening, right now, in our hearing. Following God's anointed will not be comfortable or pain free. It leads to cross, for God's sake. But it also leads to resurrection for us and for our salvation. May we trust that radical promise. May God give us grace to live faithfully in response to it. And may the peace of God that it brings keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, now in our time, and unto life everlasting. Amen.