

January 26, 2025

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

“How Things Are”

Luke 4:16-30

Jesus has just proclaimed how things are to the people of Nazareth. He reads from Isaiah 61, a prophesy of messianic redemption and restoration and then proclaims the truth: *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* In other words, all the wonderful promises of God find their “yes” in Jesus. This is definitely one of the clearer claims to being the Messiah that Jesus makes in all four Gospel accounts. Jesus is telling them how things are.

It seems at first they might be accepting His message. *“And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.”* But then it seems they doubt, *“And they said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”*

And I take these words of doubt to be a rejection of Jesus because He then goes on to greatly offend them by speaking of how the great prophets of old performed miracles for the Gentiles and not the Jews. The people of Nazareth didn’t like that. They knew how things were. The Jews were God’s chosen race and the idea that they would be rejected in favor of Gentiles was unthinkable and repulsive, angering them to the point they were willing to murder Jesus!

But Jesus had only spoken truth. Jesus was the Messiah. The people of Nazareth were hoping to see Jesus’ miracles, but they weren’t really accepting Him as the Messiah. The prophets Elijah and Elisha did bless Gentiles as they were being rejected by Israel’s leaders. It didn’t matter. The people of Nazareth knew where they stood, what they wanted in a Messiah, and how God almighty was supposed to feel about them. Jesus said things were different, so Jesus had to go.

We know better than the folks in Nazareth. We know how things are. We know that in Christ there is a new Israel—the people of God claimed by grace through faith, as St. Paul writes in Galatians: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”* Baptized into Christ, we belong to God forever. That’s how things are.

Yet, in one of those strange dualities of the Christian life, one of the things that plagues us is the very same problem as that of those folks in Nazareth—we know how things are. Without a doubt there are those sins that quickly overtake us on an impulse—anger, lust, taking God’s name in vain. But there are those others which we justify because...we know how things are.

Pride. Pride is never acceptable according to God’s Word. Yet how many Christians just know that they deserve some regard, some standing, some respect because of their station in life, the hard work they’ve done to get where they are today? How many become outraged, or at least very whiny, when they perceive some slight against them? How many know how things are, and the limit to which they allow themselves to be humbled?

Greed. How many of us bristle if the pastor starts preaching on stewardship because it’s your money, you’ve worked hard for it, and how dare he insinuate that I consider giving the ridiculous amount of ten percent—of the gross, not even the net! The nerve! We know how things are when it comes to OUR cash.

What about love? God’s Word is not at all unclear in this arena. Love your enemies and bless those who persecute you. Forgive as you have been forgiven. And yet how often do we know how things are? “I can’t forgive them. What they did was evil! It hurt me too deeply.” Or we just know the people in our circle to whom we show love and everyone else is just there, a stranger or acquaintance; not really our business to love them.

Let's face it, when we allow our culture, our desires and our own intelligence to rule our thinking, we will come to the conclusion that "how things are" is all about us. This is how the folks at Nazareth and later the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem looked at things. Ultimately, it led to their rejection of Christ because Jesus wasn't the Messiah they wanted. They thought God was good with them on their terms and they liked it that way. They got to be in control, set the boundaries, and count themselves acceptable in God's sight.

This simply does not fly. Jesus stands in our midst declaring that all of God's promises are fulfilled in Him. He proclaims the good news to those who are in debt...and the debtors don't get to edit His words because they know better. He brings liberty to the captives...and if they reject Him they remain in bondage. He proclaims God's favor, and those who think they know something better than that, lose God's favor. It's really that simple.

You know how things are. Jesus is your Lord. He is the only way of salvation. God's promises are fulfilled only in Him.

Are you living in how things are? That's the question each one of us is to keep asking oneself. The temptation hasn't changed from day one of sin. God's Word was "in the day you eat of it you shall surely die" yet the serpent convinced Adam and Eve otherwise "you shall not surely die." They thought they knew a different way of how things are and, well, they died.

Eternal death is how things should be for each one of us. Yet in Christ, no! God declares how things are and it is forgiveness by the free gift of grace. It is redemption from sin, Satan and death. Life everlasting in God's glory is how things are!

But the temptation is the same—for us to seek our own glory, our own fallen desire, our own design of how things are. And the result is the same if we do—separation from God which is eternal death and darkness.

So this is why we keep asking ourselves; are we living in how things are? Are we living in Christ, in His design to His glory? The answer is usually "no," so we repent and seek again that wonderful grace and forgiveness. The answer is usually "no," so we again seek to change our ways and live a more sanctified and holy life to His glory. The answer is usually "no," so we return to God's promises in Christ and hear Him declare, *Today this Scripture—the good news of the Gospel—has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

"Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved" is how things are. "By His authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is how things are. "Given for you, for the forgiveness of sin" is how things are.

Just like those folks at Nazareth, we are sinners who so often reject the calling of the Messiah who is right here in our lives. Yet just as His proclamation was for their good, it is also for us. *"This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."* These very words were preached by St. Peter to folks who had rejected the Messiah because they knew how things were...and in hearing the truth many believed, came to faith and trusted that this risen Christ is truly how things are.

Your fallen nature isn't always going to like what Jesus, the Word made flesh, has to say to you. But don't make the mistake of rejecting His Word because you know better how things are. You don't know better how things are. Jesus declares how things are for those who belong to Him. Ultimately what Jesus has to say to those who trust in Him is *"Peace be with you. Your sins are forgiven. Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."*

How things are can never get better than that.

Amen.