**Prophet on the Edge (2/2/2025)**

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

**GREEN**

**Luke 4:21-30**

Jesus just couldn’t stop with a feel-good message for the friends and relatives gathered to hear him teach in his hometown synagogue.

That day, among those who had watched him grow up, Jesus pushed the God envelope, informing the congregation that the miracles they heard him performed in Capernaum were not happening anytime soon in Nazareth.

What? Why not? Explain to us Jesus why you view the rejected, the afflicted and the outsider more worthy of healing than your own people? The mood quickly changes. The crowd goes from being impressed to being enraged.

It was one thing to hear about the blind receiving sight and the prisoners being set free, as Jesus’ read for them from the scroll. Those words had been spoken before by other teachers. But those teachers let the words remain safely on the parchment. Jesus, though, expounds on the power and impact of God’s word, making them leap with new life off the scroll and into the crowd.

Those in the synagogue should have seen it coming. Jesus did begin his teaching telling them that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him — and that Spirit does not sugarcoat anything.

Jesus knew that there was no such thing of a hometown advantage when it came to preaching God’s truth. He wasn’t surprised by the scoffer whispering loudly from the back of the room the derogatory comment, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

He wasn’t surprised either when the crowd got violent, kicking him out of the synagogue and chasing him to a cliff on the edge of town.

He wasn’t surprised, and neither should we be.

The adage that truth is hard to hear is true because truth never travels alone. Truth is always accompanied with change, and change is always greeted by yet another companion — resistance.

Jesus, our prophet on the edge — literally on the edge of a cliff and figuratively on the edge of making us all a bit uncomfortable — knew that while it was easier to tell people what they wanted to hear, half-truths and blatant lies wouldn’t further God’s vision of a peaceable kingdom. What would create a beloved community, where insiders and outsiders were one, was truth, which always asks for much-needed change.

Jesus is in our hometown this day. Will we listen with open ears and hearts to him? Or will we chase him away because we just aren’t ready for the changes that the truth will ask of us?

*Patient and Loving God, every time we pray “thy kingdom come” we realize that we do not fully grasp what that kingdom is. Your ways differ from ours. Help us to listen to your Holy Voice and, in the listening may we find the courage to hear truths that will lead to changing this world for the better. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**A Surprising Catch (2/9/2025)**

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

**GREEN**

**Luke 5:1-11**

They had been fishing all night, but still their nets were empty. As the rays of a new day pierced the horizon, the fishermen pulled to shore and began unpacking their gear.

A teacher named Jesus was there among the shore, too, talking among all the workers. It was then Jesus turned to the fisherman named Simon and told him to cast his nets into the deep water.

Now Simon, who came from a long line of fishermen, knew where the best places to fish in Lake Gennesaret were. He didn’t need advice from a stranger on how to do his job.

Simon also knew that the lake — 13 miles long and 8 miles wide — was a relatively shallow body of water. And because of its shallowness, any high wind that kicked up had the power of quickly turning placid water into raging waves. Anyone fishing Lake Gennesaret knew it was better to play it safe and stay close to the shore than venture into the deep water.

Perhaps Simon really needed a big catch, or perhaps there was something in Jesus’ voice that intrigued him. Whatever it was, he mustered the courage to do what Jesus had instructed. Into the deep he went, and to his surprise and delight, he hauled a net overflowing with fish.

With waves tossing his little boat about, he squinted in the sun back towards the shore where Jesus stood and marveled. Had he not listened to Jesus and stayed safely close to shore, he would never have experienced that catch of all catches.

Let us look around our Lake Gennesaret right now.

Are we close to the shore, safe and comfortable in waters that we know, even if it means missing the chance of experiencing the great and surprising catches God has waiting for us?

Or are we ready to go into the deep, risky and murky waters of life where the most life-changing God moments are swimming around beneath our fears and doubts?

As we decide where it is we want to “fish” this day, let us remember that Jesus just didn’t just tell Simon to “go to the deep water.” Jesus said go AND prepare.

Go into the deep with God and prepare for something big.

Go into the deep with God and prepare for something good.

Go into the deep with God and prepare for blessings to abound.

Go into the deep with God and prepare our lives to be changed.

*Gracious God, we want to experience all that You have planned for us, but to do so, we need more courage to venture into the unknown, risky and often scary waters of life. Grant us that courage and increase faith this day and always. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Surprising Teaching (2/16/2025)**

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

**GREEN**

**Luke 6:17-26**

All Johanna ever wanted was a home in the woods with a pond where she could sit and watch the sun glisten on the water as she wrote poetry.

She got the home — and the pond. And poetry of praises for God’s blessings in her life flowed from her heart onto paper. Praises for God binding her broken heart after losing her fiancé to cancer. Thanks for God giving her courage in her own cancer diagnosis. Gratitude for God making a way for her, after many starts and stops, to finally finish seminary and be ordained in the Episcopal Church — at the age of 60.

So much in awe of God’s blessings in the storms of life, that Johanna lovingly named her pond “Beatitude Pond,” after the “beatitudes” Jesus spoke about in what is his longest and most surprising teaching that we know as the Sermon on the Mount.

It is in this sermon that we are not only introduced to the Lord’s Prayer, but we hear the teaching of the Beatitudes, which comes from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning “blessed” or “fortunate.”

But Jesus’ illustrations of what being blessed looked like was not what the crowd gathered that day on the mountainside expected to hear. Rather his disciples, curious onlookers — as well as many downtrodden and beleaguered families and individuals who knew intimately about hardships and struggles — were stunned to hear that those who were hungry, hated, poor and weeping, were among the blessed ones.

Blessed are you because God sees and hears and understands. Blessed are you because God is holding and redeeming you. Blessed are you who know that God is still with you amid life’s trials because that very knowledge is what keeps a heart beating with hope.

To this day, the Sermon on the Mountain is considered one of the most important teachings of Jesus because of its emphasis on love, forgiveness and a hope beyond hope.

How are we defining blessedness in our lives? When counting our blessings, do we still find ourselves citing material things or achievements?

Johanna didn’t. She knew blessings were not found in rainbows after a storm, but in the storm clouds themselves. And on a February day, with the strengthening sun melting the ice on her beloved Beatitude Pond, Johanna’s blessedness was made complete.

Her ashes were sprinkled in the very spot where she wrote her poetry of praise to a God who always whispered to her amid the trials in her life, “Blessed are you.”

*Compassionate God, we praise You for always guiding, strengthening and protecting us. Help us to redefine what blessedness means in our lives. May the blessings we count be the very ones in which we finally recognize Your love and grace among us. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Love Your Enemies (2/23/2025)**

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

**GREEN**

**Luke 6:27-38**

In her book, *The Hiding Place,* Corrie ten Boom shares how during World War II, at the age of 50, she joined the Dutch resistance, working with her older sister, Betsie, in helping to hide their Jewish neighbors from the Nazis behind a sliding panel in a bedroom of their family home in Holland.

In 1944, though, the family was caught and arrested by the Gestapo. The sisters were subsequently sent to a concentration camp. Despite the brutal conditions, Betsie and Corrie clung to Jesus’ command of loving one another, loving even the very people who were holding them captive.

Corrie, though, recalled how one especially trying day her sister spoke words of faith and encouragement to her, reminding her that, “if people can be taught to hate, they can be taught to love.”

“We must find a way, you and I, no matter how long it takes,” said Betsie to the younger Corrie.

Corrie did find way. After the war was over, she committed the remainder of her days modeling what is perhaps one of the hardest things Jesus asks of us here in Luke’s gospel: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*

Corrie ten Boom modeled radical love by forgiving the guards in the concentration camp. She continued to write and give lectures about the healing power of God’s love extended to those who hurt us, and how that love was the only thing capable of healing a broken world.

Decades have passed since ten Boom wrote *The Hiding Place* and hate still seems to be winning over love. We read the news headlines and hear the broadcasts of retaliation and retribution rather than redemption and forgiveness. The few times the media does share such a story of love wining over hate, we find it hard to imagine — let alone imagine us being the ones displaying such love. It seems impossible. Unfathomable.

But we must find a way to love our enemies, bless those who curse us and pray for those who mistreat us. No matter how long it takes, the world, which has mastered how to hate, needs to be taught love. It’s a lesson that begins at home, with each one of us choosing for love to be our guide this day and always.

*Merciful God, You who are our hiding place in times of trouble, we boldly ask for the strength to do the impossible this day — love our enemies and forgive those who have hurt us. All things are possible with You, O God. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*