

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 7, 2024

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## Wisdom

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Jesus’ hometown friends and neighbors seemed to want nothing to do with the message that he's bringing to them. This manual laborer from Nazareth, Mary's boy, as they call him, perhaps a dig about his lack of paternal pedigree, dares to come and preach at them? They respond...poorly.

How do we decide who is worth listening to? What criteria do we use to judge the wisdom we receive from others? Do they need to have advanced degrees? Titles? What assumptions do we make about the wisdom a person has based on what they look like? Or our previous experiences with them?

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty good at disregarding the potential wisdom of those who don't fit my expectations regarding being wise. This is unfortunate for me, as it means I am kept from the full diversity of experience and wisdom that God has granted to humanity. But, let's be honest, this is also a great defense mechanism that we often use to avoid wisdom that might challenge our worldview or question the status quo. I know where to go to get the sort of wisdom that I **want** to get, but that is often not the wisdom I most **need** to get. That wisdom usually comes from unexpected sources; sources and perspectives that are wildly different from my own.

We see this tendency at work all over the place in our society. When was the last time our leaders asked indigenous peoples about how best to care for the lands on which they have lived far longer than we? When was the last time a governor met with unhoused people and heard their perspective and wisdom on the housing crisis? Imagine what we could learn about resilience and determination from refugees and asylum seekers, if only we were willing to listen to them.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus has been preaching and teaching here at the Nazareth synagogue, we can only infer the likely message from what we read elsewhere: it seems to be Mark's version of Luke 4:14-30, where the townspeople not only deride

Jesus' authority, but they attempt to throw him off a cliff too! There seems to be something rather threatening about what Jesus is saying: this good news for the poor, freedom for the prisoner, justice for all and an end of oppression.

Why is this message so threatening? It's not as if Nazareth is a particularly wealthy or influential town. Most of the people there would fall into the category of poor and oppressed. Shouldn't the message that Jesus is bringing be good news for them as well? You would think so, but that's generally not how humanity works.

The message that Jesus is bringing is in the same vein as most of the messages the prophets before him brought (including Ezekiel, check out the Hebrew Bible reading for today). It is a message of good news and hope, for sure. But it is also a message of drastic change, perhaps even revolution. The prophets, and Jesus, were persecuted because they critiqued the foundations of systems that most of us are, at some level, committed to maintaining; despite the fact that those very systems are harming or even killing many of those maintaining them.

While my family was at Bible camp a couple of weeks ago, I went on a retreat in northern Minnesota. Now this will give you some insight into the sort of person I am, the book I took to read during this retreat is "Suffering" by Dorothee Soelle. This book is a powerful critique of the most common Christian responses to suffering. And one aspect of suffering that the author explores is how it can lead to apathy: "Suffering is conceptualized as a destiny which one can flee only personally. Fate and apathy belong together in the same way as destiny and the person subject to it."<sup>1</sup>

When we are trapped in our suffering, we often become resigned to it as our fate or our lot in life. This seems to be where the people of Nazareth are at. They are suffering. They are suffering from economic exploitation by Rome and by the Temple system. They are an occupied people, with Roman might on display all around them. They have little hope for a better future.

In the face of that suffering it is no great surprise that most become resigned and come to understand their suffering as their fate and accept it as what must be. Then along comes Jesus, Mary's boy, the kid you watched fall and scrape his knee. The kid who learned carpentry but didn't stay to work the family business. The kid born under odd circumstances. That kid comes along and says, "Hey! You need not suffer any more. There's a different way to live... a different way to be. And all it requires is being loving and kind to one another. Doesn't that sound great?"

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<sup>1</sup> Soelle, D. (1984). *Suffering*. Augsburg Fortress Publishing.

But the people of Nazareth could not hear that message, at least not from Jesus. No wonder then, that Jesus proceeds to send his disciples out to share the good news with others. Perhaps places that can't hear the good news from Jesus will hear it from them.

Are we open to hearing the wisdom we most need to hear? Are we willing to have our long-held perspectives and understandings challenged by different viewpoints? What wisdom from God have we missed out on because we looked down on the source? What opportunities to end suffering have we missed because of our apathy? All around us are people and creatures who can teach us what we need to know to walk the Way of Christ. Can we learn to listen? Are we willing to go through the discomfort of having our views challenged?

The people of Nazareth weren't willing. And they missed out on the healing and wholeness that Christ provided to many other people and communities. Perhaps they received the good news from some other apostle at a later time. We can only hope! And we have plenty of reason to hope for that, as the witness of scripture shows that God returns to recalcitrant people again and again and again.

All around us creation sings with the wisdom of God. Will we listen to it? The wisdom that all of creation is interconnected. The wisdom that humanity is made for connection and community. The wisdom that creation has been entrusted to us to be cared for and stewarded. The wisdom that all life is precious and that each and every human bears the image of God. And the wisdom that the brokenness of the world need not be!

Jesus, the Word made flesh, came to show us the wisdom of God. But that wisdom so often comes from unexpected sources and unusual origins that we're prone to not hearing it! So, keep your ears open! Seek out different perspectives. Go to the source! If you want to learn more about issues around being transgender, read transgender authors or talk to trans people. If you want to understand the root causes of homelessness, talk to those experiencing it! If you want to address systemic racism, hear the pain of its victims!

I wonder if Jesus sending out the disciples wasn't just as much for their own growth on the Way of Christ as it was for them to share the good news. Going out into the world with a stance of love, compassion, and curiosity will lead to learning all sorts of powerful wisdom. Relying on others for you needs teaches connection and community in powerful ways. And being welcomed into someone else's home makes you much more likely to encounter their real stories, their real perspectives and experiences. If those disciples were wise, they listened for God's wisdom present in

those they encountered as they shared their own wisdom too. May we be so wise!  
Amen.