

30 January 2022

*A meditation on Luke 4: 21-30 by Kat Wagner*

**Luke 4: 21-30**

<sup>21</sup> Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"

<sup>22</sup> Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips. "How can this be?" they asked. "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

<sup>23</sup> Then he said, "You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: 'Physician, heal yourself'—meaning, 'Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.' <sup>24</sup> But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown.

<sup>25</sup> "Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. <sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. <sup>27</sup> And many in Israel had leprosy in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian."

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. <sup>29</sup> Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, <sup>30</sup> but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way.

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Have you ever seen a nature documentary about Emperor Penguins? Emperor Penguins are the big ones that live in Antarctica. They often huddle together in large groups to be protected from the extreme cold and strong winds. The adult penguins take it in turns to stand on the edge of the group, but each penguin really wants to be in the middle where it's warmer and safer.

We humans also have a natural tendency to group together. Of course, there are some people who love to stand out from the crowd, to go it alone. But some of us (and I include myself) find safety in belonging to the group. I'm talking generally. But here are some examples. Maybe it's a friendship group, or a sports team, our neighbourhood, or our particular church, or a political party – we get a sense of warmth and safety from being a part these groups. It's comforting to be in contact with others who share our passions and interests. These groups also help us to define where we belong and who we are. And they protect us from feeling alone, vulnerable, and afraid. Just like a penguin huddle. I think there's probably a lot of other people beyond myself who feel this way too (?!).

Just like us, the synagogue go-ers in Nazareth in our reading were also a bit penguin-like. They were Jews and, as God's chosen people, that gave them a great sense of value and identity. But they were also a group that lived under the tyranny of the occupying Roman forces. Grouping together gave them comfort *and* safety.

We need to jump back now to the section of Luke chapter 4 that precedes our reading today. Let me summarize it for you. Jesus had arrived in Nazareth, his boyhood hometown, and was invited to preach in the synagogogue. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he chose to read from the section which proclaims Good News to the poor, release for

captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and that the time of God's favour is now.

The synagogue go-ers were unsurprisingly very welcoming and positive towards Jesus. What a welcome message to hear! One that everyone in the synagogue could say Amen to. Any person present who had money problems would be looking forward to the good news soon coming their way. Those with eye problems would be relieved to hear that healing was coming. They were happy. They were affirmed. They were basking in the glow of God's favour resting on them.

Except that Jesus didn't stop his teaching there. This is where tonight's Bible passage picks up the story. As seems to be his style, Jesus pre-empts the difficult questions and sets out to provoke. As we English like to say, he "sets a cat amongst the pigeons"!

It's as if Jesus draws a hypothetical circle around the group of huddling penguins and says, "God's favour is not just for you". Or even, "God's favour is especially for those *outside* your group of belonging".

He even gives two examples from the Jew's beloved prophets: Elijah and Elisha. Instead of the many possible recipients of help among the widows in Israel, through Elijah, God's help goes to a foreigner, to a non-Jewish widow who lives in Sidon. And instead of a Jewish person receiving healing for leprosy, God's healing through Elisha goes to the Syrian, Naaman.

The safe, warm, secure circle of blessing that the Jews of Nazareth believed they were in was being called into question. Jesus dared to pop the bubble. He dared to expose their incorrect view.

Who would dare to question the Jews as God's chosen people?!

Who would dare to suppose that the Good News is not just for them?!

Who would dare to be so blatantly offensive, and in a synagogue too?!

They were angry. In just a few minutes, the group went from a polite and appreciative crowd, to a mob. With minimal words, Jesus had caused a riot. The people were up on their feet. It got physical. The crowd responded as one: remove the threat!; shut out the one who is disloyal!; silence the one who made them look foolish, silence him forever!

They pushed him to the brow of the hill. To the town boundary. From the centre of the circle, to the edge, and pushed him to the brink...

But somehow Jesus escapes.

Jesus had gone into the centre of his socio-cultural world, to his childhood friends and neighbours, and had sought to illuminate the edges for them. He tried to highlight God's love for those on the outside. He wanted to show them how God goes to great lengths to include.

But the comfortable centre doesn't like this message. They could not accommodate this message in their worldview – they could not accept that their thinking might be missing something.

This is what I think we can learn. The Good News, according to Jesus, seems to be directed towards those on the edge, or even those on the outside. To foreigners. To the bottom of the social pecking-order. The untouchables. The landless, poor, neglected, rejected people. And so-called 'undeserving' beneficiaries of God's favour. We call this grace. It's God's heart for those seemingly on the outside.

The hateful crowd pushed Jesus to the edge of the hill. Exactly to the place of God's favour. Somehow, Jesus passed through the crowds unnoticed.

So let me bring us back to the present moment. To our own lives. I have a short meditation exercise, which I invite you to join in. It requires a bit of imagination. In fact, you need to be able to imagine yourself as an Emperor Penguin! So, if you'd like to give it a go, I invite you now to close your eyes.

Imagine you are in cold, snowy, blustery Antarctica. You are an Emperor Penguin, along with many others there. There's a big group of penguins huddling together and others walking slowly around in the snow storm.

Where are you?

Are you snuggling up safe in the middle of the group, shielded from the storm?

Or are you on the outer edge of the group, getting some warmth, but feeling the wind on your cheeks?

Or are you wandering alone in the blizzard?

Wherever you are, what are you most aware of right now? What is capturing your attention?

How much comfort and warmth are you getting?

How much perspective of the outside world are you getting?

Now imagine that this scene that you find yourself in is actually a scene from a story being told by Jesus. You can hear Jesus speaking.

If you're in the centre of the group, can you hear Jesus' call to look up and look out beyond the group? Where does he want you to focus?

Or if you're out on your own far away from any group, can you hear Jesus' proclamation of Good News reaching as far as you, and beyond? Are you ready to receive God's favour?

What is God blessing you with right now?

Or if you're on the edge of the group, can you hear Jesus' challenging words about a prophet not being accepted in their own hometown? In this unique but uncomfortable

position that you're in, between two worlds, do you notice the movement: some people are moving to the edge too to get a better perspective of the outside, and some are moving in from the outside, needing a bit of warmth. Are you ready to make space for others and share your perspective?

Jesus' voice is fading into the distance and we are left with our thoughts. The scene is ending. We return back to the present moment in our seats. When you're ready, open your eyes.

In summary, what I see in this passage is Jesus challenging any sense of ownership or exclusion to others of God's grace, God's favour, God's good news. Whenever we get too cosy in our groups of belonging, we are at risk of losing sight of God's big picture and God's inclusive and far-reaching love. Yes, we need friends and safety, but Jesus also calls us to the edge, to look beyond, to go out and to welcome in, to broaden our horizons, to see God's good news at work in the least expected places.

I will finish with a short prayer:

God, help us to put You at the centre of our lives, and to stand with those on the edge. Help us to feel your warmth, and to know that we are included in your love. And help us to look beyond our groups and to share your love with others. Amen