

Vicar Lincoln Albrecht Jan. 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010

*“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”—Emma Lazarus (1883)*

These words are inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. For most of us, they are familiar—we can hear just the first few words and recognize them. Few, if any of us, are moved to tears by hearing them. But the immigrant arriving at Ellis Island, when they first read or hear them, is moved to tears of joy. These words are inspiring and remind people of the opportunities they can pursue in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

In our Gospel text for this morning we have divine words of poetry that created two amazing, but completely different, reactions. Just prior to our text Jesus read these words from Isaiah 61:

***“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.***

***He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”***

You see in Nazareth, in Jesus’ hometown, they were initially amazed at what Jesus had to say. They were amazed at the words that were coming out of his mouth. They recognized that he was speaking kind words of freedom and good news. They heard the words that he spoke and they could tell that he spoke differently than all the other teachers of the law before him. They heard what he did before his homecoming Sabbath address; the miraculous signs he performed; the healings he did. His fame had spread throughout the countryside. Everyone had heard of this Jesus of Nazareth; but that is all Nazareth had, too. They had only heard about Jesus’ power. They wanted to see it in action. They wanted to see what was so special about Joseph’s son.

They were amazed but incredulous. Where did his power come from? Why didn’t he demonstrate it here and now? They wanted to see his power in action—so they missed the power in the words of the WORD made flesh. The people of Nazareth wanted more than words, and they looked past the WORD. They didn’t welcome the Prophet in the land that he created, protected, and prospered. Really, they didn’t treat the Christ any differently that their ancestors had treated Elijah, Elisha, or any other prophet? Their initial amazement quickly turned to amazing obstinance as the Christ detailed how Elijah & Elisha did miracles outside of Israel. They didn’t recognize the power in their midst—amazing ignorance in the presence of the Power—so they continued to be among the poor, the blind, the oppressed prisoners who knew nothing of the favor of the LORD. So they drove him out of the temple to the edge of the cliff, hurling the WORD made flesh from their hearts.

Even a small child can recognize fault in the actions of the people of Nazareth. It’s one of those stories that we almost can’t believe. How could they have been so blind, so ignorant, so violent as they had the WORD explaining his purpose on this earth? Physician, heal yourself! Really? How could they say this to the Son of God?

Then we are reminded of that scene at Golgatha...Savior save yourself! Mockers prodded him to display his mighty power so that they could believe in him. Really the common request in both statements is “Almighty God show yourself!” “Display your power!” When you consider it this way; we too have made similar requests of God, even though we recognize his words as being kind. We ask him to do this when we feel over-burdened by the stress in our lives. We plead for him to reveal his power in the world of science. We call out to him when we feel like so many Psalmists, attacked by enemies all around us. We beg him to reveal himself in times of tragedy, like the earthquake in Haiti, so that he might explain why these things happen. We cry out for him to make his power over death evident when it strikes close to home. When pain and stress consume our lives, his words don’t seem like enough comfort. His power & glory aren’t clear enough. So we look for other ways to comfort ourselves. Wallowing in our oppression. Staggering around in our blindness. Calling out to God to show himself to us—even though we wouldn’t recognize him if he were in front of our face.

Because by nature we wouldn’t. By nature we are just like that synagogue at Nazareth. Initially we are excited by the kind words of our God. It sounds great to have a God who so loved the world, who is love, who gives us a lighter yoke. When we hear these promises, we too are amazed at the kind words.

But when we experience the life God calls us to lead—one that isn’t gleaming with glory; we become frustrated. Our hearts aren’t receptive to the idea of a life of pain, suffering, and struggle—even if it’s just a temporary life. We want the fame

and the glory of the world around us, just like the people of Nazareth. We want to be respected members of our community, to be members at the big church in town, to be men and women of renown. So our initial amazement at the kind words of our God quickly turns to violence against the WORD, just as it did in Nazareth. Our apathetic attitude towards God's Word and our repetitive rejection is tantamount to pushing the Christ off the cliff of our hearts. In the final Judgment, there is no difference.

When the WORD is rejected by the hearts of men; it simply moves on. We see this in the ministry of Jesus. When the cold hearts of doubters demand "Physician heal thyself!" he responds by saying "Today these words are fulfilled in your hearing". When cynics cry out to witness the signs of God's power, he tells us in his Word, here I AM. So, after his hometown rejected him, he went to Capernaum. His message didn't change. He still spoke the same kind words—only they were recognized to be what they really were—full of gracious promises of salvation and redemption.

There was nothing special about the people of Capernaum. They were not more deserving of this message. They were not more needful, or more ready to hear these words. But the Holy Spirit worked in their heart—preparing the way for the WORD. The Holy Spirit worked powerfully through their hearts, sowing the seeds of faith. They heard the same amazing message and because of the Holy Spirit they received it with amazing acceptance. They understood that it was by grace alone that the WORD made flesh had come to them speaking of the salvation and redemption that he would win for them. As Jesus read from Isaiah it is clear that he is talking about spiritual freedom from the captivity and oppression of sin; spiritual sight that looks to the Light of the world for everything they need.

And it isn't that the people of Capernaum were experiencing a more pleasurable captivity than the people of Nazareth, or us, for that matter. They faced the attacks of pain and stress; they dealt with doubts created by the intellectuals of their day; they endured tragedies of natural disasters and death. And they were still amazed by the gracious words that came from the mouth of the WORD. They did not snap back at Christ with proverbs, saying "Physician heal thyself!" instead they thanked the Physician of body and soul who came with healing in his wings, true healing from the disease of sin.

This Physician had come not to heal himself, but to injure himself. He took on the punishment that our sins had earned, to give to us the healing that we had not earned. The people of Nazareth used this proverb appealing to Jesus to take care of his own people. He responded by reminding them that he had come to take care of all people. The Physician had come to heal all—not just the Jews of his hometown.

As we read through this account of Christ's homecoming we marvel and wonder at the power he displayed in moving through the violent crowd which wanted to murder him on the Sabbath. However, his power was most evident not in moving through the crowd, but by moving and transforming the hearts of the synagogue at Capernaum. He demonstrated this same power as he moved your heart and transformed it. His true power was evident in transforming your stone cold heart, a heart that by nature is stamped 'product of Nazareth'. That is the power of God. That is the most miraculous of signs.

As we hear the words of the WORD, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" don't let them ring as hollowly as the words inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty do for some. Hear these words as the immigrant does, who remembers what it was like to have none of this—because that is what we deserved. But the WORD has spoke gracious words of promise to each one of us. He has demonstrated his power in the conversion of our hearts.

Because of this power of the WORD, you and I are now free men and women. We are rich in Spirit and live lives overflowing with the gifts of God. Gifts which the world cannot see, but we readily recognize. He has freed us from the captivity of sin; we no longer are oppressed by the devil, but free to serve our God, the Physician who loved us enough to injure himself that he might heal us. His kind words have done more than comfort you, they have restored your sight, so that you might see the Christ for what he is, the LORD & Savior, our loving Redeemer. AMEN.