

The Monster in the Cellar – Luke 4: 14-21
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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There is an old analogy about growing-up poor. A fellow says, “I was so poor when I was a child that I could not afford to pay attention in school.” I recall a Christmas back in the 1950’s, when things were difficult in our house. It was not because we were poor; my father was a hard-working man who often worked two jobs to ensure the family had enough. But that particular year was difficult because the steel company where he worked was on strike.

Christmas morning was always filled with presents under the tree, and this year would be no exception. My best friend had a cutting-edge, fire engine red, three-speed English bicycle that I envied. In the 1950’s most bicycles were fat wheel single gear bikes. English bicycles had skinny tires, like we see today, and three gears. Tom’s English bicycle was the envy of all the kids in the neighborhood. We would always be racing, and no one could ever beat Tom in a bicycle race. What I wanted more than anything that Christmas was a three speed English bicycle.

On Christmas morning the excitement was nearly impossible to contain. My English three-speed bicycle was waiting down there in the dark next to the unlit tree. The time arrived for the great descent down the dark stairs and to behold all the wonders of Christmas morning. The lights went on and there next to the tree was the most awful thing I had ever seen and my name was on it. “What is this?” I thought. Kids don’t always realize the challenges parents confront. My father made, with his own hands, this incredible thing that resembled a tank. It was about 15 inches wide and nearly as tall as me. The bottom had roller skates for wheels on all four corners. The front was built strong enough to take on any car and it weighed more than I weighed, and it was painted yellow and red. It had a horn on the handle bar, and it didn’t need a horn any more than it needed brakes because it was nearly immovable. What was I supposed to do with this? I certainly am not going to whoop Tom in a race! The truth is, I was somewhat embarrassed by it. No, I was really embarrassed. My mother took me aside later and told me how my father built it for me and he wanted me to have something from him. Even

then, that part meant a lot to me, but I still didn't want to be seen outside with the tank - it was not the flashy bicycle that I had dreamt about or hoped for. The "tank" was put into the cellar with all the other toys and it was in the cellar that the "tank" turned to dust.

Today's Gospel story is about a gift that was not expected. It is a story that is similar to my "tank." Jesus was asked to read from the book of Isaiah in the Synagogue when he returned to his hometown of Nazareth. He was a local boy who made a name for himself beyond his hometown. The people in Nazareth were kind of proud of him, and since he was a hometown boy they had reason to expect some extra benefits from him. You know how it is when a hometown boy does well in the world. People in Omaha understand this well. The hometown folks expect some benefits from that success.

There Jesus stands to read these words from Isaiah, and the men fix their eyes upon him, incline their ears toward him, and Jesus reads:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor
to bind up the brokenhearted
He has sent me to proclaim
Release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Up to this time, everything went just fine. The men in the synagogue liked that passage, and they were familiar with it. You know how it is when a preacher reads, say, the Lord's Prayer. Everyone smiles and nods in approval. "Yes sir, those are the good things that I expect will be coming to me if not today, tomorrow or someday." Then Jesus sits down to teach, as was the custom in the synagogue, and says what they were not expecting, you know the three speed, fire engine red English bicycle. Instead, Jesus gave them an overweight, strangely colored, slow moving tank. He said, "Today, this passage has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, all the centuries of waiting for God have ended at that very moment. On that day, God's presence will be among the

people. That gift did not settle well with those men. Jesus followed by telling them how this passage was not meant for them exclusively. The Zarephath (Zer path) and Naaman (Nay amen) references that Jesus made are really what got him into trouble. They are both of a time and place that God's good will and grace went beyond the people of Israel. Jesus was telling the men of the synagogue that the people of Israel were not going to take sole possession of the blessings of God. The men of Nazareth were not going to tolerate such words from anyone, even hometown hero Jesus, and the only thing to do was to get rid of the one who brought an overweight, unusually colored, hand made tank instead of the three speed, fire engine red English bicycle that they expected.

One of the most difficult challenges the Church faces, in my opinion, is changing roles. The Church that most of us have experienced in our lifetimes has been about personal salvation, proper ethical and moral behavior, or, to phrase it in a different way, it has been a Church that made Christianity into a religion that is all about me. Jesus was evicted from Nazareth because he did not give them what they expected, because the people of Nazareth were also in want of a God who was all about them.

Jesus told them they were included, but not exclusively, and their role would be to include and care for the poor, the captives, the impaired and the oppressed and, not only the poor, captives, impaired and oppressed in their neighborhood, but the poor, captives, impaired and oppressed where ever and whoever they might be.

In one of the congregations I served as an interim pastor, an associate pastor of the congregation wanted to become the senior pastor. He was a talented and capable pastor. That became a long, complex, and sensitive issue for him and the congregation. Because of an identical situation the congregation faced years earlier, they wrote it into the by-laws that no associate pastor could become the candidate for the position of senior minister. That can, of course, be both helpful and unhelpful. But either way, such was the way it was. Because I had to deal with the issue, I recognized one of the big reasons there was so much resistance to that happening. Because he had been the Youth Pastor for 15 years in that congregation, many of the people of the congregation were not able to embrace the role change that he would be making. They would be forced into seeing him in an entirely different way than they had experienced for the previous 15 years.

Therein rests the issue that the people of Nazareth, and beyond, were facing. Therein rests the issue that the people of the Church today are facing. We have become comfortable with the role of the Church with a focus of “me” – my salvation, my eternity, my blessings.

Jesus said to the people of Nazareth and the people of today, the waiting on God has come to an end, and God will bless all people, even the people that you don’t know, like, or care about, and if you are to be one of mine then you must change your role, as difficult and uncomfortable as that might be. As you might expect, that did not go over well with the people of Nazareth because it was not a 3 speed, fire engine red English bicycle.

Today, the world has an abundance of honorary Nazarenes. Last week this congregation was asked to give some generous donations that would go to help the people of Haiti. You were extremely generous, and everything we gave will help the Haitian people who have and continue to suffer. I could not believe when I heard the words of one of the most listened to Christians of our time and place, Pat Robertson, who declared that what happened to the poor people of that island nation was God’s punishment upon them for their unacceptable religious beliefs - a true and recognized honorary Nazarene. The people of Nazareth evicted Jesus because they expected a 3 speed, fire engine red bicycle that would impress all the others in the neighborhood, but instead received an overweight, unusual colored, tank on roller skates that would cause them embarrassment and they did not like it! The folks of Nazareth wanted to send the unexpected gift into the cellar, or in their case, over the cliff.

In the very last verse of this story, the Greek verb that is used is “p o r e u o m a i” literally means “he was going on.” Most often in our living we don’t get the English bicycle that we desired. So it is within the Church – what we often expect is not what is given, and the love of the gift from the maker’s hand is often rejected because it can cause embarrassment – it does not fulfill the role we became accustomed to, and it becomes *The Monster in the Cellar*. Jesus made it clear when he said that day: God is now here and will be attending to the poor, the captives, the impaired, and the oppressed, where ever and who ever they may be. From this day on, that will be my purpose, and the purpose of any who will count themselves among my disciples. It will not be bright,

flashy, and fast. But will be made with loving hands for all who will call themselves one of mine and, regardless of how the gift is treated, we must be prepared to move along to those whom God has declared God's greatest love.

Amen.