

“A Window to What?”

Jeremiah Nealon, Director of Family Ministry  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

March 11, 2018

Genesis 12:1-3; Isaiah 55:1-5;  
Luke 4:14-30

Since the beginning of the year, Pastor Norman’s sermons have focused on the Faces of Jesus, a Godly Play series that looks at the many roles that Jesus embodies in the gospels. The first time we went through these Faces, Pastor Norman focused on the positive aspects, the hope expressed in each of the ways we see Jesus. This second run through during Lent tracks the ways that Jesus’ face doesn’t always bring people the hope that you would expect.

This week, we see Jesus as teacher. Our scripture today shows Jesus in his first teaching role in Luke’s gospel. Jesus has been baptized, spent 40 days in the wilderness, then came back and began to teach in synagogues all around Galilee. He was starting to get a lot of notoriety. He then returned to his hometown of Nazareth. He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and is invited to read. They give him the scroll of Isaiah. These are the Messianic chapters. They are the chapters that are read when people are just sick of the Romans, want them out of their country, and want to see Israel reign again. They’re like, “Get Isaiah out. We’re reading Isaiah 61 again. We need some hope in this place.”

So Jesus finds these passages—these passages which speak to the Messiah—and he reads them. The people are amazed at his teaching. Then he sits down and he says the sentence that seals it all, “Today in your hearing, these passages have been fulfilled. This is happening now, guys.”

Predictably, there is a buzz. People freak out. The Messiah possibly is here? He just said these scriptures are fulfilled. These are Messianic passages. People are excited. They speak well of him. There is a buzz in the space. But then this other thought comes in: Hey, isn’t that Joseph’s kid? I mean, shouldn’t the Messiah come from somewhere, not from down the street, but from somewhere else? Familiarity doesn’t always breed contempt, but it does breed familiarity. Who is this guy? Are you sure? I’m pretty sure I saw you with snot in your nose, like, 10 years ago. This does not seem all that accurate to me.

And whether that troubles Jesus, or whether Jesus just knows his people and knows where to go with them, the passage takes a turn at this point. “Is this not Joseph’s son” leads to a turn. In this turn, Jesus goes on to tell two stories from the Old Testament. I will just briefly summarize these.

The first story involves the Prophet Elijah, and in his life Elijah was often on a show-down with the prophets of Baal. In one of those moments, God, through Elijah, shuts up the sky and leads to no rain for three years and a huge famine goes across the land. Elijah himself is starting to be at risk of starving to death. The Lord sends him into a city to find a widow, and he asks this widow, “Will you make me some food?” She says, “Well, I have enough flour and oil to make one more cake. I can make it for you, or I can make it for my kid and me.” Elijah, with all the confidence of a prophet, says, “Give it to me, and it

will be fine.” So she does. And the flour refills and the oil refills and it never runs out. The widow, Elijah, and her son make a little family for a while until the son dies. Then Elijah does something incredible. Elijah prays for him to come back to life and it happens. The widow says, “Your God is my God. I now see that your God is the one true God.”

Second story. This one involves Elijah’s successor, Elisha. Elisha is also a prophet, and Naaman, the man who is named, is a big scary warrior from the bully nation Syria. This big, scary warrior who has won many battles, who the king loves, gets leprosy because apparently winning battles does not ensure good health. So he gets leprosy. He has a servant girl, who is probably a prisoner of war, who was from Israel. This servant girl says to him, “There’s this prophet who can totally heal you. Just go to Israel.” So he does. Elisha tells Naaman to go wash in the water, and when he washes, the leprosy washes off of him. He comes to Elisha and says, “I now see that your God is the one true God. I want to worship your God. Give me one special dispensation, though. I need to be able to bow to my country’s idols so the king doesn’t kill me. Elisha says yes to that, which still blows my mind, but he does.

These are two stories of people in the Old Testament, non-Jewish people, gentile people, receiving grace from God and responding with faith. “I now will follow you.” This drives the people in Nazareth crazy. They are filled with rage. They drive Jesus out of the town. They want to throw him off a cliff. And the cliff wouldn’t be enough to kill you, but do you know what it does? It would be enough to break your legs. Then if your legs are broken, it’s really easy to throw rocks at you until you are dead. That is the intent. This is an attempted murder of Jesus. This is the first time we get any words of his teaching in Luke’s Gospel. He’s off to a great start. But Jesus just walks away from them because it’s not his time yet.

I think we have to lean into what in the world makes them so mad? What drives them to such murderous lengths? You see, the people of Israel were in a bad place. They were an occupied nation, occupied by Rome. They were told they were going to be a great nation. They were God’s chosen people, and they were in disgrace. They were occupied. They were being taxed to death. The last thing they wanted to hear was somebody claiming to be the Messiah start talking about gentiles, because they are not happy with the gentiles right now at all.

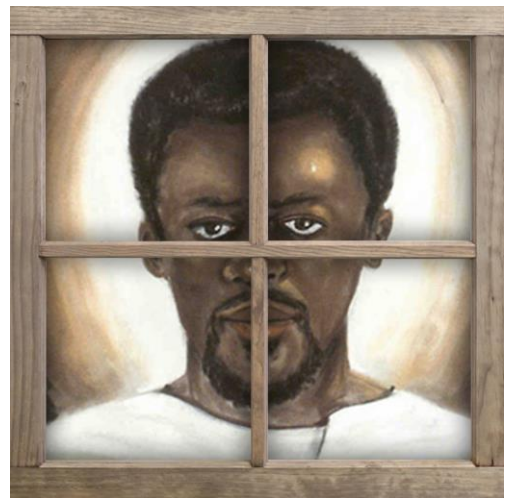
But these stories don’t point to God preferring gentiles. They don’t point to God being done with Israel and only focusing on the other. What they point to is the fulfillment of God’s call to Abraham. The passage we read from Genesis 12 is God’s first interaction with Abram. This is the description of what God is going to do with Abram, the purpose of this nation, this family that God is going to establish. The purpose behind it is to be blessed to be a blessing. The purpose behind it is to bless Israel, to create a family so that every other family in the world will be blessed. Every other family would know who God is. Every other family would know the awesome love of God that does not care about the boundaries we set on it. But the people of Israel, in their desperation, in their sadness, in their anger had taken this beautiful call to bless the world and shrunk it, and shrunk it, and shrunk it into a myopic, nationalistic, Israel-first, xenophobic view that said God is for *us* and everyone else is the enemy.

So when Jesus comes, and like any good prophet does, says, “Remember what your purpose actually is,” and it’s outside that little myopic square they had created, it sounds like heresy. It sounds like an affront to their dignity. It sounds like an affront to their nation. It sounds like an affront to their pride. The only thing they can do is put that voice, that affront to death. That’s the only option that they see.

I think that what Jesus is trying to do with them, and throughout the Gospels, over and over again, is he’s trying to help people replace a broken narrow myopic world view with the picture of all that God wants to do—a bigger and more beautiful picture of God’s purposes and God’s dreams.

There’s an African-American theologian who tries to articulate this world view that Jesus comes up with, and he just calls it righteousness. Some people with more hubris have tried to call it the whole Gospel. But Carl Ellis, our theologian, just likes to call it what he defines as righteousness. It’s a picture of four window panes, the idea being that in order to see Jesus’ face, you need to have all your window panes clean and not boarded up. If you have cardboard covering one of your window panes, you get a skewed picture of Jesus.

In the image shown here will help us put this into focus. It is four window panes and Jesus’ face. (I was unable to find the name of the original artist; the window was added by a friend of mine.) So just a quick descriptor of what these window panes represent in Carl Ellis’ view.



If you look at the top left, you are looking at personal holiness or personal godliness. This would be things like going to church. This is things like having a daily quiet time, reading your Bible, having an ethic and a character shaped by God, being honest with other people. Personal godliness.

If we move over into the top right, now we are into communal godliness. This is when we take the personal pieces and apply them communally. So I should have mentioned church here. But any kind of communal worship, a time of prayer together, if you have been part of an accountability group or small group, that is taking those personal things that God is doing in your life, those personal characteristics, and applying them with other people—being part of a group.

If we shoot back over to the bottom left, that’s personal justice. Maybe you’re going to give your money to some things. Maybe you’re going to work in a soup kitchen. Maybe you’re going to volunteer one night for Family Promise. You are taking a personal ownership over justice. Jesus talks a lot about this. He shows a lot of ways that injustice had crept into society and the personal responses we can make to these.

Then if we go to the bottom right, that is a communal justice. That is the church coming together and being part of combating injustice. It’s coming together and advocating and

working together, pooling our resources. It's not volunteering for a night for Family Promise, but it's being part of making Family Promise happen. It's being part of taking on sex trafficking. It is looking for inequality in your community and fighting against it. It is a communal justice.

Carl Ellis says if you want to see Jesus, if you want to see what he is about, what he's doing, these four window panes have got to be cleaned up. You can't put a magnifying glass piece of window over the personal holiness part because you're going to have a picture of Jesus where he has a giant eyeball. He's going to be disfigured. He's not going to look right. Something is going to look more important than something else. You can't be the social justice warrior and have your bottom right corner window be completely immaculate, but all the other windows get smashed up. You can't be somebody who cares about justice 8,000 miles away but doesn't care about what's happening to your neighbor down the street. That doesn't work. It's a skewed picture of Jesus. You can't be someone who shows up to church and loves to worship there, but doesn't give a thought towards your spiritual life over the course of the week. That is a distorted, skewed picture of Jesus.

If we go back to Nazareth, they had a view that had been formed of communal justice where they were the only victims, and they were the only people God was trying to redeem, the only blind that God wanted to give sight to, the only prisoners that God wanted to set free. Their bottom right-hand corner had gotten huge. It was taking up the whole window. There was no space for the rest of God's world view to fit in.

I think that Jesus, in the way he interacts with people in this passage and all throughout the Gospels in his role as teacher, he is looking at our windows. He is looking at the way we view the world, the way we view God, and says, "There are some windows that have got to get patched up, man. I've got to do some work on you. I've got to do some work to fix things up. I've got to do some work to allow you to see." But if somebody says, "No, my one pane that makes up my entire window is the only thing that matters," then Jesus is very easily cast aside. He is very easily rejected. And this happens all throughout the Gospels.

Now if you're like me at all and you like to get good grades, you like to do things correctly, if you have a decent amount of guilt that can form in your stomach very quickly, you might hear something like this and you might start immediately applying it to your life. You might immediately start wondering what window of mine isn't very good? How do I fix my window pane? Pastor, give me five steps to fix the upper right-hand corner, please. I don't have an answer for that. There aren't five steps. There isn't a book you can read about every window pane that's going to fix you. That's not the way that it works. But I also don't think it's the way it's supposed to work, because the beauty of the window pane picture is that the window pane is the way to see Jesus. The motivation to fix your window pane is not to become the perfect Christian. It's not to be the Michael Jordan of Christians, the best example of a Christian. The motivation is to see Jesus. The motivation is to be about the things that Jesus is about, to have your heart broken for the things that break his heart, to have your heart excited about the things that have his heart excited.

I have a story that helps me think about this a little bit. When we were in college, Donan (now my wife) and I dated long distance. I just missed her all the time. It would be Tuesday night and I would be like, "I miss Donan and I can't call her again because she has a test tomorrow." I knew we needed to build more of a relationship, but we were so far away.

So Donan is a jazz trumpet player. I don't play any musical instruments. Donan loves music. I like podcasts. Music is not my thing, but it's her thing, and I missed her. So I asked around. Who is the best jazz trumpet player? And people kept telling me, "Miles Davis, Miles Davis, Miles Davis." So I went to a website called Amazon.com, which sounds funny, but in 2003, I had never been to Amazon.com before. I made an account and I ordered Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* on CD. It arrived, and I listened to it unceasingly for a month. Every time I was in my room, *Kind of Blue* was playing. Limp Biscuit went out of the CD player and *Kind of Blue* went into the CD player.

Donan came to visit, and I told her, "Hey, I got Miles Davis. I'm listening to *Kind of Blue*," and she laughed at me. Apparently *Kind of Blue* is the most clichéd jazz trumpet album you could ever listen to. I gave this talk to Chi Alpha this week, and a jazz student told me that it wasn't even the best jazz record released in 1959.

Then Donan did something else. After she was done laughing at me, she said, "Thank you. Thank you for wanting to know me. Thank you for wanting to care about something I care about. Thank you."

Earlier this week, I was practicing this sermon with Donan and when I told that story, she started to cry because it means more to her 15 years later than it did then that I wanted to know her, that I wanted to be about the things she was about.

So why do we want to have clean windows? Why do we want to look out for our personal and our communal lives? Why do we want to look out for our justice and our godliness lives? It's not to be perfect, and it's certainly not because all of those things appeal to us equally. Most of us come to faith because one of those things pulled at us hard. It's because we want to know the guy behind the window, right? It's because we want to be where Jesus is. It's because we want to be motivated by the things that motivate him. It's because we want to weep over the things he weeps over. It's because we want to celebrate what he celebrates. Just like that Miles Davis CD—I still don't love jazz, but I love the person who loves jazz and I'm going to keep listening to it because I want to know her.

You may not be the social justice warrior. You may not be the person who likes doing the quiet times. You may not be someone who likes coming to church, frankly, but Jesus cares about all those things. He encourages people to be part of all those things. And if you want to be with the guy who represents those things, if that's our hearts' desire, then we've got to go. We've got to take the time and make the effort because we want to see what's behind the window panes. Amen.