

Crash Helmets
Luke 4:21-30
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God, you sometimes take our breath away – not so much out of wonder but shock. Give us grace to follow you, no matter what change is required. Amen.

There is a quote by Annie Dillard that seems to be a favorite of preachers. Dillard is a contemporary author who often puts words to our human sense of the holy. This quote is a bit long, but that doesn't seem to stop people from using it. It reads:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

(Teaching a Stone to Talk, Harper & Row, 1982)

I think we like it because the idea of putting on crash helmets for church seems so preposterous, so outside the norm. We think we are being edgy when we talk of the risks of waking the sleeping God or of the waking God drawing us out. We like to be reminded that the faith journey is an adventure – one that might need special gear. Or do we? Like to be reminded, that is?

It seems to me that the problem that Jesus' hometown folks had with his preaching is that it hit too close to home. It was radical, and it suggested that things might not be as they seemed. He was inaugurating change – that four-letter word always despised by the church, no matter what we claim. His message may have been good news, but it included a certain level of threat to the status quo.

Today's reading immediately follows what we heard last week – sometimes called Jesus' first sermon – where Jesus goes into the Temple in his home town, Nazareth, and reads from the scroll of Isaiah – good news of releasing the captives and lifting up the lowly – then claims that

the good news became a reality as he read it. The townspeople were impressed, but only for about 2 verses of today's reading. Then they turn on him.

And I believe we are not really any different than those folks in Nazareth. We're happy to root for a hometown hero, as long as that hero does and says what we expect. We claim we're ready for a change, as long as it is those other people who do the changing. We want things to be different, for God's Kingdom to come on earth, as long as we don't have to give up any power, influence, wealth or comfort.

But if a prophet starts talking about God being on the side of the outsiders, of some sort of limitless love and grace that knows no bounds – of Jubilee, and forgiveness, and reconciliation and justice...well, it just might be time to reject such a prophet and go back to the way things were. A prophet has no honor in his hometown if his hometown folks expect the same old message and instead he actually acts like a prophet and stirs things up a bit.

Being in your hometown makes it real because these people know you – or at least a part of you. Being who you are called to be can be even more difficult when you are surrounded by those who know a part of you – who have expectations of you, who want you to play a certain role. It takes courage to break from these expectations, to do something radically different. Even J. K. Rowling knows this – in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* Dumbledore tells Harry: It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to your enemies, but a great deal more to stand up to your friends.

Perhaps you've had an experience where you felt called to do something different from what people expected of you. If you've ever been in the position of weighing your allegiance to your old self and comfortable surroundings against the call to do something new, then you know a little bit about the adventure of new life in Christ.

And claiming to be Christian is to do just that. It doesn't necessarily mean that you will be reviled by your friends, or pushed off a cliff, or even need to wear crash helmets. But to sign up to follow Christ means to give away a certain level of autonomy – suddenly our agenda is Christ's agenda, our priorities are God's priorities. When we re-new our Baptismal Covenant, we make promises to stay in community, to work for justice, to respect the dignity of others. Now we must make decisions based upon that inner stirring of God's grace in our hearts, rather than what we want, or what we are expected to do, or what would be popular or safe.

Following Christ means we don't always get what we want, but we always get what we need. It means we can't predict where we may be called to be a prophet, or to minister, or who our neighbor might be. In fact it seems that being a Christian is actually inconvenient, uncomfortable, difficult work! And yet, the inner peace that comes from knowing whose we are makes it possible to be bold and courageous, even to our friends and family.

This morning Henry James will be presented for baptism. His family has a little bit of an idea of what they are doing in presented him – just enough to know that it is a bold act of faith, just enough to know that they are not alone in doing so. But it truly is an act of faith – a courageous embarking upon a new adventure, to turn your child over to God and admit that God

alone is in control. Crash helmets? Maybe not literally. And I disagree with Annie Dillard in one way. We don't need protection from God, but from the implications of what God calls us into. I don't believe it is to protect us from the God who created us and loves us and calls us into relationship. I believe the crash helmets are needed for the wild adventures that this loving God calls us into – times of bold courage, of surprise, of unpredictable excitement. God calls us into all that, but also supplies the protective gear – his Spirit, his Grace, his Love, gifts for ministry and increasing faith.

So fasten your seatbelts of Grace, lash yourself to the pews with Love! Strap on life preservers of the Spirit and get those flares of Faith ready. God is calling us to live into a new creation – bold change, lack of control, re-distribution of wealth and power, a rocking of the boat and radical new way of living faithfully. What you know will be stripped away, so that what you can be born in its place. Are you ready? Here we go! Amen.