

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who brings us the good news, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, amen.

2021 is already shaping up to try to outdo 2020. Talk about upside down and backwards, I mean the Browns beat the Steelers in Pittsburgh and are now playing in the second round of the playoffs. I've heard some parts of Hades had frost this morning... Since when do Republicans protest, riot, and break stuff? On the other hand, the big tech companies are taking it upon themselves to censor free speech. I haven't seen such a divided nation since the days of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War protests. What we need is a leader with a clear and positive vision for the future and a ready to go plan on how to get there. I'm not too optimistic we have such a person currently on the scene in Washington. It would sure be nice if we had something positive we could set our hearts and minds to. What we need right now is a hero we can rally around, someone who can lead us from these dark days of division, disease, and dis-ease into the paradise of peace and harmony. Jesus' life and ministry point us in that direction to a better way.

Today we pick up the story of Jesus as his fame has already spread throughout the region of Galilee. The people of Nazareth heard about all the things Jesus was accomplishing and were ready for Jesus to do in Nazareth what he had been doing in the surrounding countryside. I imagine the headlines in the Nazareth Times going something like this, "Hometown Hero Returns: Jesus, Son of Joseph,

to Appear in Synagogue.” Expectations were high to say the least. What were the people of Nazareth expecting Jesus to do? I, along with most scholars, always thought the Jewish people were waiting and longing for the Messiah described in the books of the prophets. You know the anointed one of God who would come in power to reclaim the former glory days of Israel. The Warrior King who would finally, once and for all rid their nation of the foreign kings and emperors and restore the throne to King David’s heirs. None of that is unbiblical. As the Gospels clearly show us, when Jesus came preaching forgiveness and peacemaking, and talking about loving your enemies instead of going to war against the Romans, the people turned on him. This might be true, but I’m not convinced Jesus’ failure to take a stand against the Romans tells the complete story. First of all, Nazareth was a small town in the shadow of much larger cities. Just 10 miles away was the city of Sepphoris, a new and growing city. Since Joseph was a carpenter, he likely travelled to Sepphoris for work. The people who lived in Nazareth were local-yokels and certainly not sophisticated cosmopolitan intellectuals following all the latest political maneuvering. Even Phillip, when told about Jesus of Nazareth, the one spoken about by the prophets, his reply was, “can anything good come from Nazareth...” Successful people were the ones who made it out of Nazareth. The people left in Nazareth didn’t have the time nor the inclination to study the politics of the day, nor be all that emotionally invested in

some Warrior King predicted over 500 years previously. They were much more concerned about making ends meet for today and tomorrow. They were the poor relatives of the Jews who lived in Jerusalem or Sepphoris the city ancient historian Josephus called the jewel of Galilee. What they expected of this Jesus was the miracle worker they had heard about. They wanted their sick to be healed and their bellies to be fed. They wanted a hero like Superman or the Flash to storm into town and make their troubles go away.

The good people of Nazareth along with most everyone in the region misread the signs of the Messiah. Jesus came to be neither the Warrior King nor the Superman, miracle worker, the people wanted. If that's not the kind of Savior Jesus was, then what was Jesus up to and why should we care? At first the people thought they were getting exactly what they wanted. When Jesus read that passage from the prophet Isaiah it was so familiar to them you can almost hear them cheering him on 2000 years later. Yes, the blind will see the sick were healed and the dead brought back to life. So, what happened in Nazareth? Well, for starters, Jesus abruptly stopped reading and put the scroll down and announced that today these scriptures have been fulfilled... Wait! What? Fulfilled, we're still sick and hungry. We're still mourning our dead. We still can't make ends meet let alone get ahead in this life. Why wasn't Jesus doing here, what he did in Capernaum? He healed others, come on Jesus heal our sick as well...

How many of us today have those same expectations of our Messiah? We regularly pray for our sick and dying relatives and life seems to go on as if those prayers were spoken to the empty sky. We've all prayed for healing of our world from this Rona Virus and yet over 25 million have been infected and over 350,000 have died in the United States alone. We've prayed for a healing of the divisions tearing our country apart and yet it seems to be sinking further and further into the morass of political hate. What good is a savior if He can't do something about our troubles here and now. Where's our Superman?

The traditional Church hasn't helped us much. For most of my life I learned that Jesus came so we could have forgiveness from God and go to heaven when we die. That's not much help when I'm hungry and grieving. If this Jesus didn't come to bring good blessings right here and now, what good is this religion? We "Church" people spend so much time thinking and talking about getting to heaven we forget Jesus came to be our King of Kings. We've misread our scriptures as badly as the Nazarenes of old. We tend to move directly from the Manger in Bethlehem to the cross on Calvary. If you need any proof of what I say, just look at the importance we place on the creeds. We say either the Apostle's or the Nicene creed every week in worship. Obviously, these creeds are important, but look at what they actually say about Jesus, or what they don't say. I believe Jesus who was born of a virgin, suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified,

died and was buried. All three of the creeds completely leave out everything Jesus did and taught during his earthly ministry. Most Christians are hard pressed to tell anyone what Jesus actually said, did and taught. If you want to know the heart of God, look at what Jesus did and how he lived.

I can't explain everything Jesus did and taught in this short sermon, but I can hopefully pique your curiosity. Jesus did perform miracles, but that wasn't his primary purpose. He came to be our King. He came to show this broken and sinful world a different kind of kingdom. Jesus rarely spoke about heaven, but he constantly spoke about the Kingdom of God. His stories and parables regularly started out something like this, "The Kingdom of God is like..." Jesus came to inaugurate this Kingdom of God right here and right now. His Kingdom is not *of* this world Jesus famously said to Pilate during his sham of a trial. We've been conditioned to believe if it's not *of* this world, then Jesus' Kingdom must be in heaven, where we good Christians will all go someday... A better translation is that his Kingdom is not *from* this world. A Kingdom that's not *from* this world means something else altogether. It means the Kingdom comes *from* Heaven *to* earth. It's not so much about what happens after you die, as how you live each and every day right here and right now. Jesus had a lot to say about that.

For starters, Jesus wouldn't buy into this myth of redeeming violence with more violence. He taught things like, "you have heard it said and eye for an

eye,” but Jesus said we must turn the other cheek. He taught when someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt as well. Jesus even healed the ear of the centurion soldier after Peter had cut it off. That was one of the soldiers who was there to arrest him... He showed us what it looks like to love our enemies, not just our family and friends... The Kingdom Jesus began was nothing like anything His friends and neighbors in Nazareth ever imagined and it’s pretty foreign to us as well. The Kingdom we live in is one where when you don’t get your way you storm the capital and make violence to get what you want by force. I don’t care if you’re a member of Black Lives Matter or the Republican Party, Jesus would never condone taking what you want through violence.

I believe we’re coming into a time when we’ll have to decide what Kingdom we’re going to live in. Will it be a Kingdom where might makes right or one where the oppressed have a voice? Jesus offers a Kingdom where all the hungry are fed, and where hatred and violence are repaid with love and kindness. The choice is yours. Will you accept and learn from our King Jesus as he really is, or try to make him into the Warrior King or the Superman he is not?

May you find peace and joy living under the Kingdom of God with Jesus as our one and only King. May the Kingdom of God come ever closer on earth as in heaven through the way you live your life as a follower of King Jesus. Amen.