



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN  
 February 2, 2025  
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
 Sermon: “When It’s All So Much”  
 The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

**Luke 4:21-30 (NRSVue)**

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

**“When It’s All So Much”**

How many of you, over the past week, have felt overwhelmed? (*raise hand*)

Thank God I’m not the only one.

Think for a second to yourself: What do you do, when you are feeling overwhelmed?

My patience gets shorter: with myself, and with others around me. If I'm really feeling overwhelmed – I start to push people away. I get snarky. I get sarcastic.

I just can't help myself. Patience is just not one of my spiritual gifts.

It could be worse, of course. I could try to push someone over the cliff – that's what the crowd in our reading tried to do today, when they felt overwhelmed.

What do you do, when you are feeling overwhelmed?

You'll remember last week, Jesus finished his sermon in the synagogue, after reading the Isaiah scroll:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me, to bring good news to the poor....release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind.*

And then, sitting down, he proclaims, *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

Likely, the towns people were a bit exasperated with his words. 'Today, huh?' 'Looking around, I still see the poor being poor, captives captive, the blind still blind.'

The NRSV says, they were 'amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth,' but an alternative reading of the original Greek could be more like, "they were shocked and appalled by what he said."<sup>1</sup>

I mean, wouldn't you be? 'Fulfilled today'? What do you mean by that Jesus? Where's my good news? Where's my release? What – isn't this Joseph's son? Who is he to tell me, about good news in my life, today?

Sensing their anger, Jesus digs in:

*No prophet is accepted in his hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah...yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in*

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, "Luke 4:21-20" in *Connections Year C, Vol. 1*, eds. Joel B. Green et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 219-221.

*the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.*

Jesus references miraculous healings of Gentiles found in the Hebrew Bible. Elijah and Elisha were famous Israelite prophets, sent to heal nonbelievers in foreign lands.

In other words, Jesus is saying, ‘Well, you may not be experiencing good news. But don’t worry. Other people are. The lonely, outcast, and the sick. The unclean. Prostitutes, and lepers, and foreigners. They need this good news first. Remember, we’re all in this boat together, after all.’

This doesn’t sit well with the overwhelmed crowd: ‘All well and good Jesus,’ the people seem to say, ‘but what does that do for me?’ He gets the people so riled up, they take him to a cliff and try to throw him off.

Perhaps a bit of an overreaction, but isn’t that what we’re all asking right now?

‘What about me? Where’s my good news? When’s my relief?’ Aren’t you asking that too?

And here I don’t mean to suggest that you all are saying immigrants and minorities are not worthy of good news, like the crowd seems to be saying about the Gentiles. And not just the crowd: we’ve heard plenty of people making that same argument this week from the highest levels of government:

- Blaming a plane crash on diversity hires.
- Building a detention center in Guantanamo Bay.
- Public schools in Oklahoma reporting their students’ immigration status
- Pro-Palestinian students targeted and threatened with deportation

It seems everywhere you look, ‘the other,’ the immigrant or the alien among us is being put on notice at every turn, by people claiming the name of Christian, claiming the name of the savior, the same one who in Luke chapter 4, said he is going to heal and save the alien and the foreigner, not last but first.

And I know. You’ve got to be thinking, ‘Here we go again. Paster, you know, I already have to drink an Alka-Seltzer every time I turn on the nightly news. I can’t

post on facebook without getting in an argument with my aunt. Do I have to hear about it in church every week too?

And that is precisely what I mean – it’s all so much. It’s all so overwhelming. And that fact, that it’s all so much, has got us all asking, ‘Where’s my relief?’

How could you not be asking that, right now?

And if it isn’t the news, it’s the weight of our lives.

It’s work; it’s family; it’s loss; its surgery. The heaviness of our lives never stops, no matter what is happening in the wider world.

It’s all becoming...becoming...So much.

- And when it gets to be so much, as I was saying before, I don’t know about you, but I have a tendency to turn inward. I’ll avoid a conversation, worried it’s going to turn into an argument.
- I avoid the news, social media, the radio and all the notifications on my phone. Someone sent me a message last week: ‘My desire to stay well-informed is now in conflict with my need to stay sane.’
- I start to keep things close. I start to open up just a little bit less, because I’m not sure if I have the capacity to open myself up again; I’m not sure, just how much more I can take in.
- I’ll avoid community, even church (well not now, because you pay me to be here) but before, I would. Not sure I have the capacity, to be around other people right now.

So, yes, Jesus, I’ll ask along with your hometown crowd: ‘Where’s my relief? Is there any good news, for me? You may say it’s happening elsewhere. Fine. But, but what about here?’

Sarah Ray is the Head of Environmental Studies at the California State Polytechnic University.<sup>2</sup>

An expert in Environmental Studies, more recently she has also become a researcher in the psychology of despair. Because that’s what she started to see in classroom after classroom: despair in students. For the longest time, environmental researchers like Professor Ray were trying to raise awareness of the dire effects of

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to WPC member Melissa Everett for sharing this podcast with me. See Hidden Brain, “Wellness 2.0: When It’s All Too Much.” January 20, 2025. <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/wellness-2-0-when-its-all-too-much/>

the climate change. The problem, she said in a recent interview, is that they were too successful.

Now the next generation of environmental studies students knows how bad things are for our climate and as a result they are paralyzed with despair.

She speaks of a student named Maddie, who said she couldn't go into a store anymore with breaking down in tears. She would go in, and pick up an item, like a stick of deodorant, and would think about how much environmental damage went into making it: those chemicals, that testing, the transportation, the waste. Just more carbon in the atmosphere, plastics in the ocean. So she can't buy anything. And, she's said, she won't to have kids. She's not sure about working, or even finishing her degree. Maddie could only see her life in the negative, the harm it will do; she cannot even fathom a human being, making a positive impact, on a climate already so far gone.

Hoping to bring a different perspective, one day Professor Ray lead a classroom activity in her introductory seminar. She asked her students, to think about what the world would look like, if one day, all their hopes were realized and the environment was back on the right track.

Nothing but crickets in the room. Silence, until a student named Job spoke for the class and said, 'I'm sorry, Dr. Ray, but this is all pointless. Hope is pointless.'

"Hope is pointless."

Or, as the crowd asked Jesus, 'What about me? Where's my good news? When's my relief?' It's not a bad question.

But what Jesus was trying to say, in naming the Gentiles, is that, despite our tendency to turn inward, we actually need each other if we are ever going to make it through.

If all you're doing, is asking, Where's my relief? Or what am I doing wrong? Jesus is saying, you're asking the wrong question.

The climate activist Bill McKibben famously said, 'What I can do to help solve climate change?' The answer is: 'Stop being just an 'I'; stop being just a 'you.' Change the 'I' to a 'we'; the 'you' to 'us.'

Research shows individual climate action does not do anything to stop despair. It's too small; the problem is too great. It just leads to more hopelessness. The same is not true, however, for collective action. When you work in a group, it not only does it make a difference, it leads to hope.

Hope. Remember hope?

This is where Jesus leads us, as he walks away from the cliff.

This is why he mentioned the widow of Zarephath, and Naaman the Syrian. He's trying to remind us, that when we want to turn inward, we need to remember that we are in this thing together.

You cannot sustain your hope all by yourself. The intractable problems we all carry right now, the overwhelm, the feeling of it being all too much.

That despair is too much for one person to carry. It is too much for you to carry alone.

What Jesus reminds us on that cliff is that, you are not just one person. You are not alone. You are part of a collective.

- A community that affirms the dignity and worth of each and every person, all races, all religions, all genders, all sexualities, all political beliefs, all classes.
- This is a body that proclaims love, and grace, and justice – not just in word but in deed, week after week; day after day.
- This is a fellowship, so that when one of us falls, another is there to pick them up. And when one is healed, all are healed.

The crowd, on that cliff outside Nazareth, believed the lie, that the salvation of the other does not matter to me, because we're all just in this for ourselves.

Christ's good news, was that good news to the poor, the captive, the outcast, the alien, was good news for all. For I am not just an 'I' and 'you' are not just a 'you.' We are a 'we'; we are a collective, we are God's beloved children and the body of Christ. And therefore we are never alone.

So ,when you feel alone, and overwhelmed, and when it feels like it's all just too much, remember this collective.

Thank God for a community, whose sum is greater than its parts.  
Hang on. Let us hang on together. In Christ's name. Amen.