

Epiphany 4 C Sermon
Luke 4:21-30
January 30, 2022

“A New Narrative”
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²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He 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.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But 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; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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Picking up today where we left off last week, our reading from Luke’s gospel finds Jesus in his hometown synagogue, teaching on the sabbath. After reading familiar words from the prophet Isaiah that proclaimed release for captives, sight for blind people, freedom for those oppressed, and the year of God’s favor, Jesus sat down to teach and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The people were enthralled

with him. Perhaps they'd heard the stories of what Jesus had said and done in other Galilean towns. "This is Joseph's boy," they whispered proudly to one another, expectant about what this hometown hero had in store for them. What would he do? Who would he heal? What would they see?

As if hearing these questions, the excited expectation of his hometown crowd, Jesus said, "You're all thinking, 'Us too! We know what you've been up to in the region, but we're your real family, your neighbors, your friends.' But I know," he continued, "I won't be welcome here. Remember Elijah? During the drought and famine there were many hungry Hebrew widows, but Elijah went to a widow in Phoenicia. Remember Elisha? There were many lepers in Israel, but he cleansed Naaman the Syrian."

That's when it dawned on the hometown crowd that this proud son was not there to serve them. There would be no special treatment for them. And it infuriated them. Were they right to be angry? Was their sense of betrayal justified? After all, this was Jesus, the friendly neighborhood carpenter turned miracle-working rabbi. He'd gone to Torah School at this very synagogue, played pin-the-sword on the Roman with their children, built their homes, broken their bread. Who does this guy think he is? Suddenly, he's got power and a little fame, but nothing to share with his hometown? It's no wonder they wanted to push him down a hill! He belonged in Nazareth with them! If they couldn't have him, neither should anyone else, right?

Jesus' rejection at Nazareth was not due to the people's disbelief in him or his message. It was due to the simple fact that Jesus made it clear that his work and message couldn't belong to them alone; were bigger than Nazareth; were meant to be shared. The truth is, human beings are often not very good at sharing. This, I think, is due to the simple fact that human beings have adopted a narrative of scarcity. This narrative is firmly rooted in the most basic of assumptions: that resources are limited. If resources

are limited and everyone wants some, then a second assumption follows the first: that there won't be enough to go around.

We see the narrative of scarcity operating all over in 21st century America and in the modern world. While few would admit it aloud, many, if not most people, become obsessed getting theirs in a world of increasing demand and at least perceived decreasing supply. If resources are limited and everyone wants some, we've got to make sure there's enough for us. This attitude drives personal and corporate greed. It drives the burgeoning demands on natural resources and the careless stewardship of those same resources. It drives nationalist and isolationist ideologies and, in many cases, antimigration sentiment. At its core, a narrative of scarcity even drives the discussion about affordable healthcare and the minimum wage. What all of this really boils down to, though, is fear that if we all want the same things, there just can't be enough for everyone—not enough energy, or fossil fuel, or medicine, or food, or jobs, or money, or land, or...you fill in the blank. So, we reason, we'll make sure that there's at least enough for us. For me.

In Luke's story, the people of Nazareth wanted their share of whatever Jesus was offering. They knew he would be, or already was, a hot commodity. But he was just one man, after all. Finite. Limited. Sure to run out, or be used up, or find a better place to call home. They wanted their piece of the pie and if they couldn't have it, if Jesus wouldn't give it to them, nobody else should have it, have him, either.

It's a sad and cynical world view, but if we're honest, likely all of us can see examples of this narrative's pervasiveness in our own lives. Likely all of us have, at one time or another, taken stock of the actual or perceived limited supply of something and determined that at least *we* will get ours. I know I have.

Truth be told, religious congregations are notorious for their almost unchallenged adherence to the narrative of scarcity. In church, there is never enough, am I right? There are never enough volunteers, never

enough funding, never enough participation. If I'm honest, I think that's why some people just quit going to church. In a culture that says "never enough" to everything, the church becomes just one more voice saying exactly the same thing.

And yet, Jesus challenges the narrative of scarcity at every turn. Just two chapters after this morning's story from Luke's gospel, Jesus encounters fishers who've been working all night and caught nothing. "Let down your nets for a catch," he tells them. Luke says that the nets were breaking and the boats were sinking because of the abundance of fish. Still later, Jesus heals and teaches great crowds of people with needs of all kinds. He declares, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." Still a little later, he feeds 5,000 men plus women and children with five loaves and two fish, and 12 baskets of leftovers are collected. Yet a little later, Jesus foreshadows a great heavenly banquet while sharing bread and wine with friends. Such is the abundance that Jesus reveals to challenge the prevailing narrative of scarcity.

The truth is, the only real difference between a narrative of scarcity and a narrative of abundance is attitude. The physical amounts of resources, goods, services, people, and funds remain exactly the same. But the attitude literally changes everything. An attitude of abundance acknowledges what there is and finds ways to get it to whoever needs it most. An attitude of abundance recognizes the challenges of lean budgets, but celebrates the variety of gifts in the people who make those budgets possible. An attitude of abundance evaluates limited resources and decides generosity anyway—because it feels good to be generous!

Now, before I say another word, I recognize that some of you are getting a bit suspicious. This is, after all, the day of our annual meeting and we will be adopting a budget. Let me assure you that this sermon is not a ploy to get you to increase your pledge!

I've known churches with loads of resources that couldn't get past what they still couldn't afford to do. And I've known churches operating on a shoe string that wouldn't take no for an answer and always found a way. Attitude changes everything.

I've known wealthy people who couldn't sleep at night because of a hiccup in the stock market. And I've known poor people who slept like babies and were the first in line to give whenever someone had a need. Attitude changes everything.

New England Congregational Church is one of the richest congregations I've ever known. And I'm not talking about money. I'm talking about caring people, thinking people, talented people, engaged people, resourceful people, capable people, proud people, hopeful people. This is a church of abundance.

Today, my invitation to you, my challenge to you and to all of us, is simple: consider *your* narrative—the narrative that guides and informs your life. If you're operating from a narrative of scarcity, perhaps you'd consider adopting a new narrative. May it be so with us all. Amen.