

DELAWARE-MARYLAND SYNOD
BISHOP'S LEADERSHIP DAYS

October 17, 2011
St. Peter Lutheran Church
Ocean City, Md.

Luke 4 : 16 – 21

He always wore at least two pairs of pants, one over the other.

**He had two sweaters on, too,
and a long grey rain coat over that,
torn and tattered in places.**

**His hair was long, unwashed and dirty,
and so was his beard.**

**On his nose sat a pair of old discarded glasses,
just the frames, actually, the lenses long since gone,
and even the frame was missing one of the side arms.**

**His name was Frank.
Frank Dinkwell.**

**Whenever he would come into the Good Samaritan
Center,
people in the front office would leave, and all of the staff
would flee and pretend that they had something
important to do in the back.**

**Because Frank, you see, Frank ... well, he stank
...there's really no good way to say it.**

**God knows when he had his last shower,
probably years ago, judging from the awful smell.**

**He stank to high heaven,
and the stench would hang around the place for hours
even after he had left.**

**I was the director of the Good Samaritan Center at the
time, my first real job after college with my brand new
social work degree in my pocket.**

**Good Sam, as we affectionately called it,
was a small social services agency that had been
started by the Lutheran churches and had become an
ecumenical agency,
a food pantry providing canned and fresh food and
donated clothing to poor and working families,
and to the homeless of which there were many then, in
the early and mid-80s, and there are many now, in this
poorest of cities, Camden, New Jersey.**

**Frank was one of our best customers, showing up at the
Good Samaritan Center at least twice a week,
sometimes more often.**

**We weren't supposed to give out groceries to a family or
to an individual more than once every 30 days,
but with Frank,
we would always make an exception.**

**We knew that Frank needed us, needed the food,
and besides, he was mentally ill, and you couldn't
explain to him why the county Board of Social Services
restricted food give-aways to once a month and required
a written referral each time ... rules meant nothing to
Frank's tortured mind.**

So every time he would show up, I would put together our standard three-day grocery supply for one adult: Three meats, six soups, eight cans of vegetables, bread, canned fruit, powdered milk, cereal, fresh stuff when it was available ... all nutritionally balanced and designed to last for three days ... our standard emergency food bag.

Frank, of course, had other ideas.

He really liked peanut butter, you see, and so most times when I handed him the bag, he would look through it, take out the veggies and the canned fruit, and hand back to me the items he did not want.

**“Wolf,” he would say,
... he always called me Wolf
“Wolf ...peanut butter, please!”**

And I would dutifully trod back into the food room and exchange the rejected items for jar after jar of peanut butter, and a couple extra loaves of bread, and more often than not Frank would leave Good Sam with a grocery bag that had nothing more in it than bread and peanut butter

**When they found his body,
I imagine he had one of our grocery bags next to him,
with a half-eaten jar of peanut butter inside.**

**He froze to death,
one cold winter night, in an abandoned garage in a
lonely part of town.**

**It was March 9th, 1986, 25 years ago now.
I read about it in the newspaper, just a short notice
about this homeless guy whose body had been found
frozen to death, just one of a dozen victims of
homelessness that winter.**

**They misspelled his name in the paper, but there was no
doubt that it was Frank. Just to make sure, since there
wasn't any family around, I went down to the coroner's
office to identify the body before the county could give
him a burial**

**And here is Jesus, visiting his home town of Nazareth
and sitting in the synagogue,
and the revised common lectionary reading for the day,
of all things, is Isaiah:**

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.**

Good news to the poor.

Good news? To folks like Frank?

**He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind.
To let the oppressed go free
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.**

The Year of the Lord's favor.

**Doesn't quite feel like a year of favor, does it, what with
the economic crisis and decline of the mainline church**

and the constant threat of terrorism and one killer storm after another, an earthquake, even.

Didn't quite feel like the year of the Lord's favor either to the Hebrews when Isaiah penned these poetic words.

See, Isaiah says all this at a time when the people of Israel are anything but hopeful.

The people of Israel, in fact, are in utter despair.

They've just returned from exile.

They had lost the war against the Babylonians, and so they were dragged off into slavery and into exile in Babylonia, and now they have come back only to discover that their cities and towns have been destroyed in the war.

After years and years of slave labor and harsh oppression, they finally come home ... only to discover that there's nothing to come home to.

Jesus, too, speaks at a time when the nation of Israel is experiencing anything but a year of the Lord's favor.

The country is occupied by the Romans.

It's not the King of Judah who runs the government, it's that ruthless guy Pontius Pilate who squeezes every penny of tax money out of the poor people for the benefit of the faraway emperor back in Rome, aided by that bloodthirsty King Herod who is nothing more than a pretender to the throne of David.

A year of the Lord's favor? Hardly!

Even in Jesus' personal life, nothing like the Lord's favor seems evident.

He's just spent 40 days in the dessert, fasting, being tempted by the devil, and once he is done teaching in the synagogue, the people of Nazareth – his people – will turn against him and try to throw him off a cliff.

The Lord's favor? Not!

But see, it is precisely in this desperate situation that Isaiah has the nerve to talk about freedom, about hope for the poor, sight for the blind, freedom for the prisoners. About rebuilding the community, about hope in the midst of hopelessness. Can someone say Amen to that?

Jesus, too:

Here he is, this Jesus, come home to the sleepy little town where he grew up, a backwater little town so unimportant in the scheme of things even the Romans pay it scant attention.

Jesus is in Nazareth, the arm pit of the world with its terrible reputation, the town of which Nathanael will say: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? in the same way in which people say: Can anything good come out of East Baltimore?

Turn to your neighbor and say: Can anything good come out of East Baltimore?

See, those Israelites back in Isaiah's time, stunned by the utter destruction they find upon their return ... that's us.

Those Hebrews back in Jesus's time, trapped in hopeless surrender to a foreign power ... that's us.

Here we find ourselves:

in a world that mourns the losses of thousands of lives in tsunamis and floods and earthquakes and wars and terrorist attacks near and far

in a country that has seen the towers fall in New York and the flood walls break in New Orleans

in a culture of fear where the very term "homeland security" seems a cruel oxymoron

in a time of great uncertainty when folks barely hang on to their homes and to their livelihood, when the great beloved church is reeling from decades of decline and years of indifference

**Here we find ourselves:
Trapped in hopelessness
Lost in despair
Overcome by fear**

See, it's precisely in this terrible and desperate time, in the midst of hopelessness and despair, that Isaiah speaks a word of hope that Jesus speaks a word of truth

**that God breaks into our human condition and enters human history
proclaiming hope in the midst of hopelessness.**

Turn to your neighbor and say: Hope in the midst of hopelessness.

And it's precisely out of this sleepy backwater little town with the bad rep that Jesus comes ...

**the best thing that could ever come out of any town ...
Amen?**

the best thing that could ever happen not just to Nazareth, but to East Baltimore and to Dundalk and to Cumberland and to the whole world. Amen?

**The one thing, the only thing that can bring hope and joy and salvation and restoration of community.
You certainly can say Amen to that.**

**And even better, this hope that is coming from Jesus is coming to us now,
this hope is coming today!**

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, Jesus tells us.

Today, this hope is coming into the world.

Today is an important word in Luke. He uses it 12 times, more than any of the other Gospel writers put together.

TODAY in the town of David a Savior has been born to you.

TODAY you will be with me in paradise.

TODAY salvation has come to this house.

TODAY this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

For Luke, today is a moment of radical change.

The shepherds come and see the savior born in Bethlehem ... they return rejoicing and praising God, they have been changed. Amen?

The thief on the cross knows Jesus as his savior and ends up in paradise ... he has been changed. Amen?

Zaccaeus hosts Jesus in his home and changes his entire life as a result. Can I have an Amen to that?

**For Luke, TODAY brings radical change.
Turn to your neighbor and say: Today brings radical change.**

I like to think that God's intention is for us to live in hope and harmony, rejoicing in the incredible diversity of races and of cultures and of languages.

I like to think that Isaiah's words of hope give us strength and power in the here and now to live and work toward God's intention for our lives.

I like to think that Isaiah's words, when Jesus makes them his own,

**bring hope for us today
hope in the midst of hopelessness
hope in the face of fear
hope in the depth of despair.**

Hope even for the poor ... and I like to think that this good news includes even a poor soul like my friend Frank Dinkwell.

You see, three years after Frank Dinkwell died, the Lutheran churches got together and opened a shelter for homeless people where those out in the street could get a hot shower, a warm meal, new clothing, counseling, even a hair cut.

That program is in operation to this day, serving several hundred homeless people each year.

The program is called FRANK'S PLACE.

**And Frank himself is home now,
no longer hungry
no longer homeless.**

**Frank has a home now,
in a mansion that has many rooms.**

**Frank has a home now,
and Frank is in a place
where they serve peanut butter with every meal.**

And that, brothers and sisters, is the Good News for you today, and to that, let the people of God say: AMEN.

