

well over 120 people in attendance that night. So he created a plan to give out a ticket to each person, and then do a drawing after dinner to determine who would receive the coats. It seemed like the only fair way to go.

When the tickets began to be drawn, the winners came up to collect their coats. What tangible good news for them, which they truly needed to stay warm and safe in cold weather! As Steve writes, “Every winner was greeted with loud applause and shouts of congratulations. There were numerous tearful thank you’s and I gave out numerous tearful hugs along with the coats.

But as the number of coats dwindled down to the last few, a remarkable, unexpected sequence of events occurred...Previous winners were coming back with their coats, handing them back to us.

‘Pastor Steve, I have plenty of blankets, I really don’t need this. Give it to somebody else.’ It happened again and again.”³

Soon, there were more coats left than there were tickets in the box. So they kept drawing. Eventually, every single person had had their number called. Every single person had had an opportunity to have one of these amazing coats. Yet after that, there were still two coats left on the table. Folks had wanted to celebrate good news for others in the form of a warm coat, more than they wanted to have that coat for themselves. The sharing outpaced the receiving. The generosity eclipsed the need.

This crowd saw the good news of scripture being fulfilled in front of them. Not only that, they were participating in it! They experienced the Spirit of the Lord at work in their midst. And this crowd responded. Not by assuming that they deserved the goodness all for themselves. Not by being frustrated that there were not enough coats for everyone there. But by celebrating that others were getting the help they needed. By responding with generosity, even though that meant making a really big sacrifice. By getting caught up in the shared joy that freedom, release, and good news bring.

Jesus safely passed through the midst of that crowd in Nazareth and went on to be the fulfillment of God’s good news for the whole world. Though that crowd’s attempt to throw Jesus off the cliff foreshadows his eventual arrest and crucifixion. But even those events did not stop him from bringing good news to all kinds of people, far beyond the hometown crowd. Jesus is still passing through crowds today, wherever people celebrate good news on behalf of others; wherever they remember that God’s mercy is not just for ‘me,’ but is always for you and you and you, too.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Cameron DaSilva, “Watch: Lions fans ruthlessly booed Matthew Stafford in his return to Detroit,” RamsWire, January 14, 2024, <https://theramswire.usatoday.com/2024/01/14/rams-lions-matthew-stafford-boo-fans/>

2 Justo L. Gonzalez, Luke, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

3 Steve Salinda, “Losing that Religion—Part 5, Tossing Starfish,” Oct 9, 2024, <https://theultracontemplative.substack.com/p/losing-that-religion-part-5>

January 19, 2025

Second Sunday of Epiphany

“Celebrating the Good News for Others”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 4:14-30

I know we’ve all been in the midst of Lions’ fever. But for today, let’s go back a year ago to what was the Lion’s first home playoff game in 30 years. It was a game against the LA Rams. Returning to Detroit’s Ford Field for the first time since his departure was the Lions’ former quarterback, Matthew Stafford. This time though, he was in a Rams uniform. Stafford played for the Lions for eleven years starting in 2009. People always hoped he would be the one to take the team all the way. But that never happened. In 2021, the Lions traded Stafford to the Rams, receiving their current quarterback, Jared Goff in return.

When Stafford stepped onto the field last year for that playoff game, everyone wondered how he would feel about being back in the city where he’d spent so much of his career. But what shaped that moment was not so much Stafford’s feelings, but the crowd’s. As one reporter wrote, “[Detroit] supporters in the stands wasted no time welcoming [Stafford] back to Ford Field. Only, their welcome wasn’t warm. They booed him ruthlessly as he took the field before the game, raining boobirds down on [Stafford in his Ram’s] jersey.”¹

Stafford was no longer a beloved member of the home squad. Detroiters didn’t think he had anything left to offer them. What fans saw was a former hometown boy, someone who’d made Detroit his home, but had not delivered. To some, Stafford’s trade, which he’d requested, had felt like a betrayal. The crowd’s message to him was “You’re not welcome here anymore. Get out of town!” I know we could debate whether booing an opponent is sportsmanlike or just the name of the game in professional sports. Perhaps it’s not a great look, either way. But I will at least note, the Lions came out on top that day!

I think it goes without saying that Matthew Stafford is no Jesus; neither is Jared Goff, or any other quarterback. But the crowd’s response to Jesus in the synagogue has some parallels with the crowd at that Lions game. When Jesus spoke in the synagogue he was back home in Nazareth. So Jesus was a hometown kid, returning to the people who had raised him and supported him as he grew. According to Luke, since Jesus’ baptism, he had begun going to other synagogues to preach to his fellow Jews. People were praising him

for what they heard he'd done. So on that day, Jesus came to their place of worship and learning. He was invited to open the scroll of scripture. He read the words of Isaiah, words that the community had heard many times before. Isaiah's message had been written for people living in exile in a foreign land, as they anticipated God leading them back to their homes. But Jesus said that, by the grace of God, that message was being fulfilled now in him. Through Jesus, God was bringing good news to those who were poor; release to those held captive; helping the blind to see again, setting free people who were oppressed, and declaring a jubilee where property was returned to its original owners and slaves were set free. This was radical stuff. And yet, when they heard this, it sounded good. At first the people in Nazareth spoke well of Jesus and were amazed at the gracious words that he shared.

But something changed *in Jesus* as they talked about what he'd said. He correctly anticipated that their amazement would quickly sour. And so Jesus jumped back in with two more stories from scripture, which the people probably knew well, too. Both of the stories pointed to God's salvation for unexpected, non-Jewish people—a widow who was from Sidon, not Israel. And a military commander named Naaman who was from Syria. It was not that they were upset that God intended to save people outside the covenant community. God's intent to do that had always been clear. The problem was that Jesus was not bringing a special measure of good news to the folks in Nazareth. He said that his friends and neighbors there had no particular claim on his gracious acts. As commentator Justo L. Gonzalez writes, "they should expect no special favors."² And the people in Nazareth were put out by that. Wouldn't this teacher, whom they knew and loved, want to bless them, too? Wouldn't he *especially* want to bless them?

We love good news. And rightly so. But we especially crave news that is good *for us*. Most of us need some good news. We are dealing with a lot—family situations that have no clear resolution, diseases whose treatments are uncertain, worries about having enough to pay our bills, news of war and destruction that piles on every day. We are not wrong to yearn for news of salvation, freedom, and healing for our specific troubles. God's love is always with us, that is certain. And yet sometimes, tangible good news arrives for someone else who we didn't expect. Someone else gets what we had hoped for, or wanted, or thought we deserved. Or we feel slighted; maybe jealous; or even a bit betrayed. Or we might feel like God's grace and mercy are limited: will there be enough left for us, too? When all those emotions are hovering under the surface, we may erupt in anger to cover over our disappointment, pain, and fear. It seems to be a human tendency that we struggle to celebrate good news for others, unless it is specifically good news *for us*.

Rob Bell's story illustrates this dynamic. For years, Bell was an evangelical

pastor who founded the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. It grew to megachurch size during Bell's tenure. He was lauded in the evangelical community for his preaching and teaching. In 2011, though, Bell published a book called *Love Wins*. One thing he did in the book was to question the existence of hell. Or he at least suggested that hell might be, by God's design, empty, or temporary, or that it might simply exist on earth in the suffering of so many. Bell came to that conclusion because of his understanding of God's grace in scripture. His reading of the Bible began to reveal that salvation by grace is so powerful and so good that it might not logically lead to damning some people. I know there are a range of theological views among us, so Bell's thoughts may be shocking to some of us and quite sensible to others. However you understand the outcomes, Presbyterians generally do share that focus on the ultimate goodness of God's grace and love.

Right after the book came out, the evangelical community erupted in a firestorm. A fellow pastor dismissed Bell and everything he'd ever worked for in one tweet, with three short words: "Farewell Rob Bell." In modern parlance, Bell got canceled. He lost his job and most of the connections he'd developed over his career. All because he suggested that the good news of salvation might apply to more people than his community expected; it might be good news for those who don't seem to deserve it; and grace might even be good news for everyone! This dynamic preacher was written off and put out of his community because he dared to proclaim God's good news for others, not just for his home turf crowd.

The good news, which is for you and me and the whole world cannot be canceled. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus to do all that he said. He has been at work ever since releasing those held captive by their own hearts or by unjust systems, helping people to see, and announcing goodness and help to those who are poor. We, too, are often surprised about who receives such good news. That surprise can make a crowd react in different ways. For some, the surprise results in fear or anger that can make them drive folks out of town. For others, surprise leads to celebration, gratitude and shared joy. Because they realize that all our lives are bound up together. When we can celebrate the way God is at work bringing good news to someone else's life, then we all flourish.

Pastor Steve Salinda had long felt called to minister to folks without stable shelter in his community. To help folks during the cold weather, with the help of generous friends, he ordered 100 special coats that can be turned into sleeping bags. Word got out in his neighborhood that he would be distributing these coats at a community-wide dinner where he often served. And word really got out! Steve began to realize that even with 100 coats, there wouldn't be enough for as many people as were going to show up. He ended up with