

Text: Luke 4: 14-21
Title: Just Over the Hill
Date: 01.24.10
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There is a haunting, and I guess for me ~ holy, song by Bruce Springsteen that I often find myself humming. One more lyric singing in my head.

In his garage/studio, on an old four track tape recorder, Springsteen sang what he thought would be a demo ~ but something about the stark sparse guitar, the mournful lonely harmonica, and his hushed and mumbled voice captured a familiar human longing and the song was released as it was recorded. The song is “Mansion on the Hill.” These are the lyrics:

There's place out on the edge of town sir, risin' above the factories and the fields, now ever since I was a child I can remember that mansion on the hill.

In the day you can see the children playing on the road that leads to those gates of hardened steel, steel gates that completely surround sir, the mansion on the hill.

At night my daddy'd take me and we'd ride through the streets of a town so silent and still, park on a back road along the highway side, look up at that mansion on the hill.

In the summer all the lights would shine, there'd be music playin', people laughin' all the time, me and my sister we'd hide out in the tall corn fields, sit and listen to the mansion on the hill.

Tonight down here in Linden Town, I watch the cars rushin' by home from the mill, there's a beautiful full moon rising above the mansion on the hill.

You get the drift...

Just over the horizon,
just beyond gates,
just out of reach,
just over the hill ~

there is a different reality where music is playing and people are laughing. Just over the rise there is a mansion where you don't belong, where you can't get in, where you are left out....I've felt that way most of my life. Maybe you have too?

The song has a beautiful mournful longing, but there is also an undercurrent of anger and a sense of injustice. “Mansion on the Hill” is the song sung by immigrants, refugees, and by everybody else who has ever felt marginalized or left out.

It's the song sung in public housing projects and shanty towns.

It's the song sung in Soweto and Lawndale.

It's the song sung in Palestine and Port-au-Prince.

It's the song sung by Jesus....

During my recent trip to Israel I visited Nazareth. Built at the base of a steep hill, Nazareth was an insignificant Hebrew village of maybe only four to five hundred people. Most of the housing was probably caves and there is little evidence of trade or agriculture of any consequence. There is no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament or the Talmud. And, in the Gospel of John when Nathaniel asks “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he may have been besmirching more than just its size. Nazareth was the other side tracks. It was a dog-eared, two-bit, scrub-brush town.

But, just over the hill from Nazareth is Sepphoris. It would have been about an hour walk. Sepphoris was set on top of a hill at the intersection of two trade routes. You can see it from Nazareth. It was referred to by a first century historian as: “the ornament of all Galilee.” It was cosmopolitan, politically connected, culturally rich, militarily important, and beautiful....

There were stone paved roads and Roman columns.

There were bath houses and beautiful mosaics.

There was a theatre and a market.

There was a synagogue and an aqueduct.

It was the mansion set on the hill.

In fact, many scholars think that when Jesus said that “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” He was referring to Sepphoris.

Dear friends, it is entirely plausible that if Joseph was a carpenter the only work he would have found was in Sepphoris. It is entirely plausible that most every morning Joseph and Jesus would have hiked over the rise to work at building this cosmopolitan city jewel. The building/rebuilding project of Sepphoris was done at the bidding of Herod Antipas ~ Herod the Great's son ~ on the backs of cheap Hebrew labor.

And, while some of the architectural beauty of Sepphoris was built after Jesus, clearly the foundation, the character, and the contrast between Nazareth and Sepphoris was built or being built during the first thirty years of Jesus' life.

Our text this morning reads as the coming-out-party for Jesus. He returns to his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath and as the neighborhood kid who was making quite a splash he was handed the scroll of Isaiah to read. How he came to the particular text that he read is unclear; what we have recorded is an odd splicing together of a couple verses and phrases from Isaiah. But, Luke writes that Jesus read:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim
freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor....*

Then he sat down, taking the posture for preaching, people pressed in closer to hear his first sermon, and Jesus threw down the gospel gauntlet.

Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

Gasp! And, the word here for “fulfilled,” *pleroo*, means to make replete, that is, literally to cram a net, level up a hollow, or fill to the brim. It is a word that describes a complete accomplishment. There is nothing more to do, nothing more to add. The time is ripe, arrived, and full. It’s now.

When I standing sweating on the sun bleached stone streets of Sepphoris ~ with the ruts of Roman wagon wheels still visible ~ it all seemed entirely plausible to me....

Jesus didn’t pick a text about the beauty of earth or the glory of the heavens.

Jesus didn’t turn to a passage that pointed to sin and called people to repentance.

Jesus didn’t scan the scroll for scripture that demanded a higher standard of obedience.

Jesus didn’t preach about belief or read a verse about doctrinal purity.

Jesus read to the poor and the marginalized that the good news was theirs.

Jesus read to the oppressed and imprisoned that they were free.

Jesus read to the blind that they could see.

Jesus read to a bunch of coworkers and friends that the mansion on the hill was a mirage, that the kingdom was at hand, and that they were no longer outside, rejected, or marginalized but they were accepted, emancipated, and the day of the Lord’s favor had arrived.

It was a stunning claim!

It was a short sermon with an audacious application!

Oh! I know.... Surely Jesus meant all of this in a spiritual way.

Surely Jesus didn’t mean that the doors of the jail should be unlocked.

Surely Jesus didn’t mean that the day labors of Nazareth were going to get a fair wage.

Surely Jesus didn’t mean that blind would really see....

The good news was for the poor of spirit.

The freedom was from the captivity of sin.

The recovery of sight was spiritual vision.

The oppression was damnation; the release was salvation.

But! But, that makes no sense. It barely seems plausible....

If what I saw of Nazareth and Sepphoris is true, than what Jesus was talking about must also be real, tangible, earthy, and physical. It seems like a cruel joke if Jesus says to the poor and oppressed that their mansion is in heaven and he is simply going on ahead to prepare rooms for them. No! The mansion was on the hill, and this was somehow about the coming of justice and freedom ~ real, tangible, earthy, physical....

Maybe it is helpful to consider it this way:

On January 1, 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation the United States was in the midst of the Civil War. The south had seceded, the union of states was in tatters, and the war was taking an enormous toll. The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Lincoln, in both his words and his claim to authority over the whole of the split union, contended that the proclamation was true and real. He proclaimed that the slaves were free.

But, the slaves who lived within the realm of the Confederacy remained in bondage. Many didn't even know about the proclamation when it went into effect. Its authority was denied and nullified by local and regional power. And yet, in reality, from Lincoln's perspective, they were free. As the union was restored, as confederate states assumed their rightful place, and as the slaves came to realize their freedom, their emancipation was already a reality.

My apologies to all American history teachers and Civil War buffs, I know that the proclamation didn't include the north and some border states. I know that real freedom was realized more slowly and with more complexity ~ not unlike our freedom.

And, my apology to all southerners, I know you think the war isn't over and that we are currently just enjoying a brief respite....

But, maybe it a helpful image.

For, Luke this exchange in the synagogue in Nazareth is the inaugural address of Jesus. The kingdom has arrived. Luke places this as the first picture of the public ministry of Jesus and then stacks up snap shots of the lame being made to walk,
and the blind being made to see,
and those in chains being released,
and the dead being raised.
He stacks up pictures of this new reality.

Or, Luke places this proclamation of Jesus as the prelude ~ sung in the same key as the song of Mary ~ and then breaks into a symphony of teachings and stories and relationships that embodies this good news.

Jesus read of an old hope that was etched deep in the hearts and souls of those Nazarenes with bent backs and calloused hands, and then he said that the time was full up to brim. He tapped into an ancient notion that a day would come when God would right-side-up creation and he said, "Today is that day...." He didn't offer a radical new vision or call for them to grab pitch forks and storm Sepphoris to remake reality. He said this is reality.....

You are free.
The day is now ~ the day is coming.
Live into your freedom.

Dear friends, may it be so with us...

For that same emancipation whispered by Isaiah, and proclaimed by Jesus, makes it through the cross and the tomb, through the birth of the church, through all the twists and turns of history, and it is still sung today....

You are free from whatever binds you.
There is no longer anything to fear.
Everything is topsy-turvy-right-side-up.
The light of hope has triumphed over the darkness of despair.

The oppressed are released.
The imprisoned are free.
The poor have good news.

And, we, as those upon whom God's Spirit is poured, are called to live into that emancipation...
in Oak Forest and Haiti, in Soweto and Roseland, in school and hospital, in AA and in Brewery,
in family and neighborhood, in the shadow of the mansion on the hill....

Even so come, Lord Jesus.
Amen.