

“The Son Rises”

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Nothing will be the same in Galilee or the world after this Sunrise.

Luke 4:31-44

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Gilded sky

Some of you live in places or visit frequently in places where you regularly see the sun rise, or set, or both. That’s not the case for Linda and me. The view of both sunrise and sunset from our house is obscured by trees or houses or both. When we visit or stay in a place where, as the hymn says, the sun “gilds the skies,” we can’t get enough. If you’re not familiar with that word, something that is gilded is gold-plated.

The sun gilded both morning and evening sky while we were in Amelia Beach, Florida. From the back window or breezeway of our condo we could see the sunset, and from the balcony overlooking the ocean the sunrise.

Do you know why the sky is blue during the day and gilded in the early morning and late evening? With apologies to Tarheel fans, it actually has nothing to do with the University of North Carolina. Nor is it because the sky is reflecting the color of the ocean or drops of water in the atmosphere or even particles of pollution or dust.

The scientific explanation for sunrises and sunsets is basically this: Blue light has a shorter wavelength than red. During the day, the sun’s rays must travel only a short distance to earth, and the blue rays are more concentrated. When the sun gets closer to the horizon in the morning and evening, the blue rays have to travel longer, and they become more scattered, allowing the reddish hues to dominate.

In other words, scientifically speaking, the sunrise and sunset is really rather ordinary. But the effect we see is extraordinary. Let me say it another way: Sunrise changes nothing, but it changes everything. When the earth revolves to allow the sun’s rays to enlighten and warm the earth, it’s doing what it’s been doing since the dawn of

creation. It's totally a God-thing, but it's a thing God has been doing on schedule for as long as there was a sun. Perhaps the reason God has created light in such vivid splendor and variety is to remind us that when the sun rises, everything changes. Imagine what it would be like if the sun never rose? Cold, dark, hopeless would be the world.

Ready to kill him

My sermon title is obviously a play on words. The S-O-N rises in our reading from Luke 4:31-44 today. This is the moment when God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ revealed fully his glory. You might be tempted to push back a little on that statement. After all, in the first two chapters of Luke we have multiple visits by angels, including the angel hosts that filled the sky on the night of Jesus' birth singing "Glory to God in the highest." True, but only a handful of people saw and heard those angels. And then for three decades Jesus basically went underground. We actually have fairly good evidence that nobody in his hometown of Nazareth was saying as Jesus grew up through childhood, adolescent, and young adulthood, "Hey! That's Jesus, the guy the angels sang about to the shepherds!"

In chapter 3 of Luke's gospel, Jesus is baptized by John and there's a voice from heaven that says, "You are my Son, whom I love." A lot of people apparently heard the voice, but Jesus himself didn't capitalize on it, didn't start teaching. Then in chapter 4, Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, obviously a private moment.

Jesus then returned to his hometown of Nazareth and started teaching. People were praising him, even when he said Isaiah's words were fulfilled in him. Jesus used other Old Testament illustrations to say that God is not just interested in "our people" – he has his heart set on the likes of Sidonians and Syrians too. Then his hometown folks were ready to kill him.

Dumbfounded

So we come to Luke 4:31, where the Son rises in Capernaum. It's a fishing town on the northwest rim of the Sea of Galilee, and once again we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue. Last week Pastor Amy summarized what the Sabbath service was like, as best we can reconstruct it, and we got a better sample of it in the Nazareth service. Luke doesn't need to repeat that, and in fact what Jesus read from the scroll and what he said is less important now than how the people responded.

They were amazed at his teaching. "Amazed" literally means to "strike out" or to "cast out." It can indicate people who are panicked or astonished. They can't believe it. They are dumbfounded, mouths hanging open, gob smacked. They're mesmerized, like what happens when you see a sunrise or sunset.

Why? Because his teaching has authority. It's content, delivery, style, all of that. But he has no need to quote rabbis or argue with Pharisees. He just speaks, and he

knows what he's talking about. He's wise and confident and what he says is true. Have you ever heard a speaker who made your heart say, "Yes! That's new and old and fresh and real and I can't imagine anyone saying it better." That's the response Jesus evokes in Capernaum.

In verse 33, the story gets really interesting. The shriek of a demon-possessed man interrupts the synagogue service. Can you imagine someone doing something like this in a traditional worship service like this one? A shrill, loud voice: "Go away! What do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" Hold your questions for a moment about demons; I'll come back to that.

Luke seems to have used the word "amazed" seems deliberately to set this up. Wouldn't you be "panicked" if someone acted that way to disrupt our church service? This was apparently a phenomenon known to people in the time of Jesus, and nobody knew what to do with somebody like this. Jesus is not afraid, not intimidated. He is what we like to call in leadership theory a "non-anxious presence." He rebukes the demon: "Be quiet!" and commands the demon to "come out." The man falls to the ground, unhurt but calm.

Once again, the people are amazed. This time not by the authority in his teaching, but by the "authority and power" in his command of the evil spirits. No wonder his reputation spread quickly. Verse 37 is typical of what Luke likes to do in his Gospel and in Acts. Having zoomed in on one incident, he now gives the wide angle view.

There's another zoom-in, verses 38-39. We meet Simon for the first time. In Luke's gospel, to this point, we don't even know who he is – what a large part he's going to play in Jesus' public ministry, and an even larger part in the early church. What we know is that Simon has a home in Capernaum, that his mother-in-law either lives at his house or is visiting, and she's very sick. Jesus is asked "to help her." If he can rebuke and cast out demons, reducing a fever hardly even seems worthy of mention. But people didn't understand fevers in those days except that it indicated something was wrong and could even become fatal. Besides, her fever is a "high fever" – literally in Greek a mega-fever.

Luke uses the same word for the fever as he had used for the demon. Jesus "rebuked" it. She not only got up but immediately resumed what she loved doing best – waiting on everyone. She's a beautiful model of showing our thanks to Jesus by serving others. Consider those mission trips we were talking about earlier.

We don't know a lot about Sabbath observance in those days except that the Friday night Shabbat meal has been a custom in Jewish homes for millennia, and it's evident the Saturday morning practice, at least in Jesus' day, was the synagogue service of Scriptures and prayers. What we know about the rest of the Sabbath day was more

about what people were not supposed to do – work, travel, hunt, sew, weave, bake, cook, travel, and so on. The Mishnah has a list of 39 prohibited tasks on the Sabbath.

So what did they do? Here we have an idea. They apparently just hung out as families, and visited near neighbors. Kind of like Andy and Barney and Aunt Bea and Opie on the front porch. It was a day for relaxation and conversation. Freeing.

Most likely most of the day was just like that for Jesus. But when the sun went down and people were freer to move about there was a lot of commotion – not just in Capernaum, but other towns were close enough for word to travel fast. If you had a loved one who was sick, wouldn't you get them to Jesus ASAP? Jesus patiently heals each one.

There were more exorcisms too. Demon-possessed people were shouting, "You are the Son of God!" He rebuked and silenced them.

Luke obviously wants his readers thinking about this phenomenon of demon possession because it comes up twice in this one text and, in fact, a lot in the first half of Luke's gospel where his ministry is concentrated in Galilee. So what's going on, and should you and I be aware of and proactive about demon possession.

I'm going to disappoint you if you want a simple and short answer. I have limited experience with demon possession, although I wrote in my book that there was one moment in the 1990s where I thought I saw the face of a demon while praying in this sanctuary before dawn on a Saturday morning. Other than that, I've had people ask me about demon possession but I don't know that I've ever had a direct encounter.

I take my cue from the Apostle Paul, who in his letters largely avoids the topic. He offers no manual for exorcism, no magic formula, no explicit warning to avoid demons. If he wanted Christians to be consumed with this topic, he would have said much more.

There is one notable exception in Paul's letters, when he reminds the Ephesians that the battles we face in life are spiritual in nature. He acknowledges the reality of evil powers in the invisible world, but what does he tell us to do about it? He doesn't refer back to stories like this and say, "Do what Jesus did and rebuke the demons!" No, he says our response is to put on the armor of God – your salvation, Christ's righteousness, his peace, his strength, your faith. Arm yourself with who Christ is and what he's done and who you are in him, and then use Scripture and prayer as your weapons.

C. S. Lewis had it right in the introduction to the *Screwtape Letters*, when he said we humans tend to go to one of two extremes – we either deny the existence of demons or we obsess over them. Neither is the witness of the Bible. So then why do we read so much about them in the Gospels? Because this is a unique moment, and the devil knows all of God's redemptive purpose is at its pivot when the Son rises and begins

to shine. The devil doesn't know everything about what God is going to do in Jesus, so he's going with trial and error to see if he can thwart or at least diminish the impact of Jesus.

Luke tells us the stories precisely to help us find that balance. The devil is real and he's trying every possible way to divert and distract what God is doing. He'll try anything – including shrieking, silence, hurting body and soul, direct and indirect attack. But Luke doesn't want you to come out of this story more fearful or more in awe of the devil or demons.

That long night behind him, Jesus sneaks out to a solitary place early the next day. People go find him, and they do. They try to keep him for themselves, but it doesn't work.

Why does he silence the demons and why does he leave the crowds hungering for him? It's a matter of timing, in part. What the demons say is true, but they are shrieking in public for the same reason that the devil tempted Jesus to show off by jumping from the temple pinnacle – to short cut his path to glory. He'll have none of it. When it comes to the crowds, there's something else in play. He can't allow them to manipulate his timing and purpose. He knows what he's doing and when he needs to do it.

Jesus is on a mission, and he turns south to the synagogues of Judea. Interestingly enough, we don't get any details about those synagogues. When we meet him at the beginning of chapter 5, he's back in Galilee.

But the Son has risen, and he's amazing. Nothing will be the same in Galilee, Judea, or the world after this Sonrise. This chapter is pivotal. Kevin spoke about the temptation, Amy about the rejection in Nazareth, and now we've been in Capernaum.

As Richard Vinson puts it, when you summarize this whole chapter, the point is this: "No matter who tries to stop Jesus, be it Satan or an angry crowd or a happy bunch of groupies, Jesus cannot be diverted from the path God has set. Satan wants him to jump, Nazareth wants to throw him down, and Capernaum wants to tie him up and keep him; in each case, he walks away – God has other places for him to go."

Give him a chance

What this passage – this whole chapter – does for us is to remind us how similar people are through the ages and across the ocean. They have homes and families and jobs. Some of them go to church, others apparently are too busy or preoccupied. Some are sick, and others want to help their sick loved ones. Some have spiritual and mental health maladies that nobody seems to be able to do anything about. Some are curious and want to learn. Others are cynical and even angry or violent.

If they'll give Jesus a chance, he'll amaze them. He'll leave them dumbfounded by what he says and does, by who he is. When the Son rises, he changes everything. But sometimes it seems like he changes nothing. He shows up, and then he leaves again. He won't be confined to our constraints, and he almost never does the same thing the same way twice. Are you OK with that?

Some of you need to get busier. Some of you need to be more often in the place where Jesus is visible and active. And some of you need to do what Linda and I needed to do the last couple of weeks – just get away to a solitary place. It was hard, in some ways, though made easier for me by the fact that I wasn't feeling so well physically myself. But it made me realize how deeply I need and value the times alone with God.

At 66 years-plus years old, let me give you a little hint about life, if you need it. It never slows on its own. You don't get through one day or one season of life and think, "Good, there are no more demands on my time or energy." You need times with God like you need air or food or water. You need times when you'll just allow yourself to be amazed with the Son of God. On the other hand, it's often easy to excuse our lack of compassion and inaction toward people who are in need all around us.

Use these moments to ponder the message today, and to take whatever and whoever is on your heart to Jesus. Mention situations, names, decisions, world events. Ask Jesus to amaze you with his peace and joy as the Son rises.