

A Sermon for Every Sunday  
Luke 4:14-30  
Carla Pratt Keyes

As a way of beginning our reflection on Luke, I want to share with you a poem by the Poet Laureate of Richmond, VA, where I live and pastor a church. The poet's name is Douglas Powell, but he's best known in Richmond by his stage name, Roscoe Burnems. He is a published author, poetry slam champion, and teacher. He says he writes poetry to educate, uplift humanity, and break down the walls that divide us as a community.

The poem I'll read to you is called "Lycanthropy of a Black Boy." It will help you to know (if you don't already) that "lycanthropy" means the supernatural transformation of a person into a werewolf, like in movies and folktales. An older use of the word points to madness involving the delusion of being an animal. It also helps to know that Roscoe Burnems is a Black man. He understands the predicament of the boy in the poem from the inside out.

### **"Lycanthropy of a Black Boy"**

Monday mornings, Jeremiah walks into my class growl ready. Foaming at the mouth with struggle. His teeth have been snarling the entire weekend.

King of his den. Only man in his house.

Jeremiah is seven and already howls at a full moon.

In class is when the daylight hits. You can tell it is warm and foreign. The claws retract, he walks erect. He tries to smile, plays with the other boys.

Sometimes he forgets not to bite or scratch, Sometimes he forgets he too is a boy.

I hug all my kids before they leave. The first time I gave him a hug, he thought I was attacking. The hair on his back raised and sharp. Paws ready to defend. Reminded me: Being a black boy feels like you become a mantle piece, before you become a man. Snared in the world's delusion of black boys only being animals.

I know this complicated curse, Always having to transform in order to survive this concrete thicket of death and poverty, or the moon's prejudice and profiling. Where it's all hunt or be hunted - trying to contain such a necessary beast. All Black boys shapeshift themselves. To be aggressive, growing up in a hood timid could get you shot. To be passive, because showing your teeth to police might get you shot. Silver bullets come from both the block or a badge.

While the privileged frolic in the prairie: The ability to fail or fight without fear. No pale gaze making them monsters.

At schools where I've taught, the white kids get mental health therapy, slap on the wrists. The Black boys get metal detectors, felonies, handcuffs on their wrists. Prison pipelined into muzzle and collar before they develop a bark. Tried as beasts before seen as humans. Five times more likely to be held in captivity.

I don't want see Jeremiah gripped in a cage or hanging from a leash. A boy who just wants to listen to nursery rhymes and play football. So I hug him and teach him, because no one has, because he deserves love and a childhood, because the forest he's being raised in is all shadow and predators. I don't want this madness to devour another boy.

I show him my class is sunshine. Never wax or wane. Never crescent or full, Blue or new.

Nowadays he gives me a hug before and after school.

I teach him he is not an unnatural thing. Not folklore. Not a beast. Just a boy - No matter what he sees in the forest. No matter what the moon says.<sup>i</sup>

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One of my Seminary professors used to say that the primary question in the gospel according to Luke is not about *WHAT GOD DEMANDS for righteousness*, but *WHO NEEDS ATTENTION AND COMPASSION*. *Who needs attention and compassion* is the primary question throughout Luke.<sup>ii</sup> That idea came back to me when I heard Roscoe Burnems' poem. I imagine Jesus pointing to seven-year-old Jeremiah and saying *that's who. He needs my compassion today. He is why I'm here.*

Jesus said something *LIKE* that, the day he stood in his hometown synagogue and unrolled the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. According to Luke, this was Jesus' inaugural sermon – a message and moment that would define his priorities and set the tone for his ministry. Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah, but within it, he knew exactly what he wanted to read, and Jesus turned to the place where it says: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. The Lord has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

It was a riveting moment in the life of the synagogue. Every eye was upon Jesus when he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled." *Today*. It's the first word Jesus said, according to Luke, as Jesus began his public ministry. Remember that word from the angels' message? To you is born *today* in the city of David, a savior. "Today" is a big word in Luke – a signal that it's time to pay attention, because *promises are being fulfilled. Salvation is happening. Today.*

The good folks of Nazareth were excited about what Jesus had to say ... until he began talking about prophets who had fulfilled God's promises and shared God's salvation **BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THEIR HOMETOWN**. Elijah and Elisha were prophets of Israel; they did plenty of

work at home. Yet Elijah famously supplied a non-Jewish widow and her son with magic jars of flour and oil to sustain them through a famine. And one of Elisha's best-known miracles of healing was for a general from a foreign army. By referencing these stories, Jesus emphasized both prophets' surprising ministries to people outside of their own communities. That's when the expectations of his hometown friends were laid bare.

They had known Jesus his whole life. They had watched him when his parents were busy, had fed him from their own tables, had instructed him in the beliefs and practices of the synagogue. Jesus was one of them! He loved them. Maybe ... he OWED them. *What these people thought they had coming* was some special treatment! A little extra good news, perhaps. A special taste of that freedom Jesus was talking about. The chance to see their own debts wiped away. Didn't they have the right to expect that? *WHO DID JESUS THINK HE WAS*, to take those blessings someplace else?

Imagining the turmoil (and feelings of entitlement) within Jesus' home congregation got me to remembering the historical context I read about recently when, in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century America, southerners would gather for worship. It was common for slaveholding white people to bring their slaves to church with them. The white people sat in the front, while the enslaved Black people sat in the back or in galleries above. I knew that had happened, but hadn't thought about how it would feel, you know? ... to the pastor, for one, content to preach in that context. (White pastors preached "light on Exodus and heavy on Paul," said the book I was reading. Makes me wonder how you'd tiptoe around texts like this one.)

White people in these slaveholding churches would have known they were the main audience – the heirs to God's promise, right? ... blessed with wealth and power and salvation happening for them day after day after day.

Black people in those churches? They were overhearing promises aimed by the pastor at the people who controlled them. They were hearing sermons intended to keep them in their place – a place that was dangerous and painful and humiliating by design. Everybody got used to that.

But what if, one day, the message of grace and liberation was aimed not at the folks up front, but at people all around the edges and in back? THAT'S THE KIND OF SHIFT that was felt by what I'll call the "front pew" folks in Nazareth. And they didn't like it one bit, when the blessings they expected *for themselves* were directed *elsewhere*. They became so angry, they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.

Sometimes what is *ugliest* in people comes out when our expectations aren't met, and the things we feel *entitled to* start to slip away. I think much of violence we've seen in the United States in the last few years is connected to that anger people feel, when their place in the world is challenged or they don't think they'll *get* what they deserve. And it's easy (for me at least) to point to white supremacy riots or to insurrection at our Capitol a year ago and FEEL CERTAIN that I would NEVER be part of such a crowd. But it's more productive, probably, truer to Luke's intent in telling this story, *to examine my own heart*.

My congregation has been sharing webinars and book studies about the work of antiracism, and we're being challenged, individually and collectively, to examine the places we bristle with indignation, or cling to what assets we have, or imagine we are special to God or blessed, maybe, because of good work we've done.... All kinds of questions get raised, like, for white people: where does the comfort and security we've gotten used to *GET IN THE WAY* of our ability to hear and care for others? For people of color, what needs lamenting or releasing or embracing so you can breathe more deeply, and more fully receive Christ's blessings? Those may be places to start.

It's complicated! I read a blogpost recently that suggested we have trouble understanding ourselves because certain feelings masquerade as other feelings. In particular, our grief and depression and fear can look like overreaction, irritation, and anger. The author of this post said she realized that on a family vacation. They were whitewater rafting and she was terrified her younger daughter was going to fall out into the rapids. So what did she do? She started barking out orders, sharp and gruff. Her husband said, "Don't be mad." She started to cry and said, "I'm not mad; I'm scared! This is fear talking!"

Those were powerful words for her: *this is fear talking*. That moment of realization helped her look back on some of the most shameful incidents of her life and see them in a whole new light. She said, "I'd always wondered how I could be so mean and controlling to people I loved so much. To understand that those behaviors were caused by fear and that *IT WAS ANXIETY TALKING* lifted my shame and provided awareness that was life-changing." From that point on, she was careful to interrogate her feelings about everything from the stresses of parenting to the grief she felt when her father died. She realized that often, her fear and pain came out in the form of a short temper or moodiness or anger.<sup>iii</sup>

That gets me to wondering, if we could ask those folks in Nazareth to step back from the cliff and search their hearts for a moment, might they say: *THIS IS FEAR TALKING*? Would they admit they were AFRAID that there weren't enough of God's blessings for everyone in the world to get some? Would they acknowledge their anxiety about giving up what little advantage they felt they had?

I wonder if, deep down, we are all more like that seven-year-old in Burnems' poem than we'd like to admit ... at least insofar as we are scared and in need of a hug. And I remember again how the angels' first words to the shepherds – their first words announcing Jesus' birth – were, "Don't be afraid. *Don't be afraid*, because, look! I bring good news to you – wonderful, joyous news for *all people*."

Jesus brought salvation for everyone. That was his message from the start. And he invited all people to come *TO HIM* and come *WITH HIM*. He invites us, too. The only (and essential) condition is that we come in a way that excludes nobody else – a way that recognizes *ALL ARE WELCOME*. And if we want to share all that Jesus came to do, then we have to be asking with him: who needs attention and compassion today? Who needs good news and release? Who needs to have their eyes opened and their debts forgiven? And how can *WE* overcome our fears?

How can WE RECEIVE what Jesus has to offer us, while also appealing to those better angels who remind us *GOD'S NEWS IS FOR EVERYONE ...?*

It's important for us to figure that out ... so that we can receive Christ's salvation and also EXTEND IT where it is most needed today.

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<sup>i</sup> © 2018 This poem is featured in the self-published collection *Chrysalis Under Fire. I've changed the spacing.*  
[https://rvapoetlaureate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Copy-of-Lycanthropy\\_cRBurnems.pdf](https://rvapoetlaureate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Copy-of-Lycanthropy_cRBurnems.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Carol Lakey Hess

<sup>iii</sup> <https://community.today.com/parentingteam/post/one-truth-that-helps-my-family-like-no-other-fear-wears-disguises?fbclid=IwAR2V6pWnxbtAfF67nCWpil64HUNx4u9sh5uIOIHSNT2p9ldrAhSoZTswiM>