

Sunday, February 3, 2013: Luke 4:21-30

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 23, 2013

Indiana's fiery love affair with basketball began just a few years after James Naismith taught his Massachusetts gym class to toss a soccer ball into an elevated peach basket. After he got a taste of Hoosier Hysteria in 1925, Naismith wrote that basketball seemed to have its "origin in Indiana."

We Hoosiers couldn't agree more. Basketball is a virtual religion around here, and nowhere more so than in high school gymnasiums, where every opening tip-off gives David another chance to bring down Goliath.

You're likely familiar with at least one Indiana upset. The acclaimed 1986 film *Hoosiers* is inspired by the true story of a ragtag group of Indiana farm boys from Milan High. A dramatic last-second shot was the Milan Miracle, in the game of the century. But it's what happened the following year, in 1955, that is the upset that true legends are made of.

That story begins in 1922 with D. C. Stephenson, a local Indianapolis politician and leader of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana who conspired with city leaders to segregate black and white high school students (who at the time attended school together). A few years later the all-black Crispus Attucks High School opened its doors.

Partly because the best African-American teachers couldn't get jobs elsewhere, Crispus Attucks soon boasted one of the most highly educated faculties in the state. Then, in the 1940s, when the school was finally permitted to enter the official state basketball tournament, Hoosiers discovered that at Crispus Attucks, excellence in the classroom was matched by excellence on the court.

Overcoming name-calling from the stands and bias from officials, the Crispus Attucks Tigers qualified for the state championship game in 1955. The U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was only ten months old; the country was riddled with tension and turmoil.

Enter the Crispus Attucks Tigers, young men with sharp minds and fleet feet. Another team sat on the opposing bench, but the real rival was racism with its ugly, ongoing history.

Crispus Attucks won the final game, 97–74. When the buzzer sounded, fans poured onto the floor to celebrate—and then onto a fire truck for the parade down to the city center. Next would be the traditional picture taken at Monument Circle—but the players were stopped. The Tigers weren't allowed to get out at the monument, but were rerouted into a black neighborhood for what white civic leaders considered a “more appropriate” celebration.

This kind of turn—from cheers to contempt—is only too familiar. This week's passage from Luke vividly foreshadows the move from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, in effect framing the entire gospel and calling attention to a fundamental theme: too often we welcome Jesus conditionally. We're all for the gospel in theory—as long as it comes to us on our terms, and as long as we are among its principal beneficiaries.

Our first move is to patronize the prophet's declaration. Oh yes, of course, restoration and justice and equality for all—but it's a bit overblown, don't you think? It's only a basketball game. They're only kids. Let's be serious: this isn't the dawn of a new age; there's no new civil rights movement just around the corner.

“Fulfilled in your hearing”? Really? I mean, isn't this Joseph's son? He's got some big ideas (and wonderful delivery!), but he's awfully naive about the real world we know so well. Let's not get carried away.

And the second move—once the prophet responds by pointing out that our skepticism is par for the course and that every dawn has always been dismissed by plenty of deniers—is to defensively, furiously reject the prophet. Here Jesus, by recalling a few choice precedents in Israel's history, elegantly unmasks our patronizing attitude as deeply self-interested: if the gospel is not for me, then it will be for no one at all.

The poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed? Beautiful words, but the instant we sense that we may not be featured among the new world's heirs, we lay hands on the prophet and drive him away from the town center, away from Monument Circle, up onto “the brow of the hill” to Calvary.

Crispus Attucks High School now includes a museum honoring that 1955 championship team, emphasizing how they helped lay groundwork—in collective confidence, in credible hope and in the key role of young people—for the civil rights movement that followed. Remembering ancestors like these can help us discern the stakes involved in our own day as well.

Please note: Jesus never actually condemns his listeners. He never definitively casts them as the skeptics of old. Rather, he describes the cherished, instructive past and thereby offers a sobering word of warning about the future. He bids us take care as we choose which parts we will play in the gospel's unfolding drama, this great contest in which the conventional order of things will be upset in every sense of the word.