

“Always Ahead, Never Quitting”
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Luke 4:14-30

If there was ever a time to apply the phrase “quit while you’re ahead,” it would have been when Jesus went to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. It started well. Jesus unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, read a few verses, and then preached on them. The verses Jesus chose were filled with inspirational hope for a brighter future: “good news for the poor,” “release to the captives,” “recovery of sight to the blind,” the liberation of the oppressed. Everybody could get on board with that.

Consider their plight. Poverty was rampant. Most people struggled just to survive. Their land was occupied by Roman forces that jailed or executed anyone they suspected might be a threat to imperial power. Jesus preached to people forced to support this oppressive regime, to feed and house the soldiers that ruled their lives, with heavy taxes, which made their lives harder still. Imagine the resentment they felt.

So when Jesus proclaimed, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” it was a welcome message, but one that went misunderstood. Jesus spoke of himself. He fulfilled the prophecy in his person by embodying the Kingdom of God, come down from heaven to right the wrongs, to bring healing, liberation, and peace. In him, Isaiah’s prophecy would come to full fruition, but the people listening didn’t get that part, and how do we know? Because had they understood Jesus correctly, they would have been scandalized.

Instead, they seem both impressed and confused. “All spoke well of him and were amazed.” At the same time, they found it curious that the son of a carpenter could summon such wisdom. They knew him from way back when. Some people remembered Jesus wearing

diapers. Their question about how a carpenter could be so eloquent was sort a backhanded compliment, along the lines of “Well, we never expected him to amount to much, but look here,” and for some the relevant question was “Who the . . . does he think he is?”

Jesus sensed their veiled criticism and kept preaching, and this is where he started to go off the rails, when he could have quit while he was ahead. His claim that “a prophet has no honor in his hometown” was true for all of the biblical prophets. The people who knew them the best misunderstood them the worst. To claim he was a prophet like Isaiah was radical. To criticize the crowd for failing to see him as a prophet was offensive. Jesus didn’t challenge them out of pride or to be mean. He wanted them to understand.

Maybe that’s why he pressed on when conventional wisdom would say that he should have quit, but he had more to say, dangerous things, practically guaranteed to insult and anger people. It’s as if he wanted to upset people. Perhaps he needed to agitate them to break through their complacency, to get the message across about the true meaning of Isaiah’s prophecy, the true meaning of the Kingdom.

So Jesus told two stories from Hebrew scripture, what we call the Old Testament. In the first, God sent the prophet Elijah to a widow at Zarephath. This was during a time of famine caused by a three-and-a-half year drought. He asked for water, and she gave it. Elijah also asked for food, but she replied that there was only enough left for a small meal to be shared with her son before they both starved to death. Elijah promised that if she was generous, she would be rewarded with abundance, and so it was. Miraculously, her flour and oil did not run out, and later, when her son fell ill and died, Elijah resurrected him from the dead. [I Kings 7:8-24]

In the second story, the prophet Elisha, Elijah’s successor, was approached by Naaman the Syrian. He needed healing from leprosy. Elisha gave him instructions to bathe in a stream,

which cured him. [II Kings 5:1-14] Jesus pointed out that there were plenty of widows in Israel during the drought in the time of Elijah who needed help, and that there were plenty of lepers in Israel who needed healing from Elisha, but in both cases, they didn't receive it. Perhaps those widows and lepers simply didn't ask, because they didn't accept Elijah and Elisha as true prophets of God.

Whatever the case, you'd think that these stories would bring hope to the people of Nazareth in the midst of their suffering. The stories showed how God's power works wonders in the world through His chosen prophets. However, far from bringing joy, Jesus' words provoked rage. You see, both the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian were Gentiles, foreigners, people beyond the pale unworthy of God's grace. These were not stories that the Nazarenes wanted to hear, because these stories reveal how God reaches beyond the normal boundaries that make people feel safe and secure and superior to others.

Can you see the progression of the sermon, how Jesus builds it up, in an almost subversive way? Starting with the welcome words of Isaiah, a promise of hope, freedom, and peace, Jesus then claims that he fulfills the prophecy in his person, though people don't understand what he means.

So Jesus pushed harder. He baited them, declaring himself a prophet like Isaiah dishonored and misunderstood by his hometown. Then he whipped out two stories they didn't want to hear, stories of how God favored the foreigner, helping them while Israel suffered. These stories brought up an awkward theological dilemma.

Why would God do such things? It was because the chosen people had wandered away from their faith. They felt entitled, privileged, deserving of God's mercy. They presumed to assume that God was for them and only them, not for others, that they had a monopoly on His

divine grace. For distressed people, these disturbing stories hurt, and that's why they formed a lynch mob and tried to kill Jesus.

Somehow, he escaped, maybe because Jesus cannot be trapped or manipulated or controlled, and we need to pay this heed. Like the Nazarenes, we like the prophecy of Isaiah. The message of mercy to the poor, freedom for the downtrodden, and healing for those who cannot see, resonates with the compassion that resides deep in our hearts. Yet, like the Nazarenes, we feel dissonance, too, when it comes to how Jesus sees this prophecy playing out.

Sometimes, we like to think of God as our property, our personal patron, because we've earned it, and sometimes we resent it when God pours out his mercy on people who differ from us, people whose perspectives and feelings and opinions are opposite ours and, therefore, obnoxious to us. We chafe when Jesus calls us to reach out with him to them, sharing grace and mercy to people we view as less than us, people we find suspect or even we hate. But Jesus doesn't quit while he's ahead for the simple reason that Jesus always stays ahead. He doesn't need to quit, and he won't, because we're the ones who have gotten behind, and he's determined to bring us forward.

Jesus will not tolerate the artificial limits we impose on the Kingdom. He came for all people, from every language, race, and culture across the world: for the dispossessed and displaced; for refugees and immigrants; for workers deprived of a living wage by those who put profits over people. And, yes, Jesus came for the titans of industry, too. Jesus came to save the clever and the clumsy; the popular and the lonely. Jesus will not exclude or leave anyone behind, and does not want us to condemn and judge others.

That's the vision of the prophecy fulfilled, and when we allow Jesus' love to dispel our fears, we come to know the joy of a glorious Kingdom where peace and justice prevail – in our

hearts and in our world – a vision worth pursuing, despite the risk, despite the discomfort and sacrifice required. For it is in the fulfillment of the prophecy embodied in Jesus, alive in us, that the blind can see, the oppressed go free, and the poor someday will know want no more. I know it seems like a dream, but it is a good dream, and God is full of surprises. After all, who ever knew that a woodworker from Nazareth could preach? Amen.