

Text Study for January 11, 2017

Sermon at Nazareth (Isaiah fulfilled, Elijah and widow, Elisha and Naaman)

Prayer:

God of the nations, Show us how to love all the people of the earth, of all colors and kinds: those with technology and without; those who make due with very little and who use many resources; those with formal education and without; those who call upon your name and who do not; so that all your children may be glorified in the name of the One who brought glory and liberty, Jesus Christ our salvation. Amen.

Luke 4:14-30

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

²³ He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself! And you will say, "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴ And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

- * ***Take some time to discuss these passages. What jumps out at you? What do you find curious or confusing?***

It's ok to have some pride in the hometown boy, isn't it? The local community had been hearing stories about his astonishing teaching and miracles, and as they did, they very well might've said something like, "Yep, that's our boy. You know, I remember when he was still wet behind the ears! Why, he and my Johnny used to play stick ball together ~ and remember when he got in trouble in school for putting a tack on the teacher's chair? Well, his Dad made sure HE didn't sit down for a month!

"But look at him now! Small town boy makes big! Had a guy passing through just last week wanting to know if he was around. We'll probably start getting all sorts of people stopping in here, since he's from here and all! They'll want to know all about him. Might even help our economy if we think smart about this! Might even put up a sign so people will know for sure he grew up here! Yep, that's our boy!"

Well, of course, this is just an imaginary scene, but the text does say that Jesus was being praised all over the place and, just like today, people want to know all about a celebrity ~ who his parents were, where he was raised, what he was like when he was young. The small town boy had made it big, the people were swelling with pride because, "Wasn't this Joseph's son?" He grew up right here with our own kids so naturally we had a hand in making him who he is today! We're proud of our boy!

- * ***Has anything like this ever happened to you or to anyone you know? Has someone come home to a hero's welcome? Was it all roses, or were there some who felt other feelings ~ perhaps jealousy or resentment?***

Bart Ehrman, in his book, *The New Testament, A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, points out the obvious: In the book of Luke, Jesus' ministry begins with a sermon in the synagogue that infuriates his fellow Jews, who then make an attempt on his life. Not a great beginning!

A little deeper dig into this story through the HarperCollins Bible Commentary reveals that Luke has changed the order of events in his Gospel. Mark and Matthew place this story much later in Jesus' ministry. The story is also longer and more detailed in Luke than it is in the other two synoptic Gospels. It seems that Luke wants to give a clear

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picture of Jesus' life in this brief encounter with his home folks. In these verses, we see a preview both of the nature of Jesus' entire ministry and the fact of his rejection by his own people in view of his acceptance of and being accepted by outsiders. This foreshadows his being rejected and nailed to the cross by his own people, the religious Jewish leaders.

In his hometown synagogue, Jesus is doing what other male Jews do in any community: taking his turn to read scripture. He gets to choose the scripture from the scroll that he is given, and he chooses the Isaiah passage, adding one comment to it after he sat down: *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.* In this one comment, Jesus summarizes who he is and what he is doing. He understands himself as having received God's Spirit and fulfilling the prophecy he just read from the Book of Isaiah. The response was admiration, and skepticism.

- * ***Imagine being in the pew here at the church in Tioga on a day like the one described. You know this young man; you gave him cookies when he stopped by your house. You've also heard the rumors of his successes and praises. Now you've heard him speak. What do you think your response would be: admiration or skepticism?***

If Jesus had only stopped there on that day in the synagogue, everything might've been just fine. The people were still wowed by him. They were still commenting with pride and awe that this man came from their community ~ from common folk just like them. The skeptics might very well have been convinced by the stories friends and family around him told. Maybe he could've told a few himself about his successes and the crowds who followed him. Because, according to Luke, Jesus was a faithful Jew. He lived and worked within his tradition, regularly attending synagogue and participating as all male members were permitted to do, by reading Scripture and commenting. He followed the regular practice: stand to read, sit to comment. He's done everything right, if he'd just stopped there.

We know, though, from reading scripture ~ that Jesus isn't very good at holding his tongue when he has something to say, even if he knows it's going to ruffle a few feathers.

- * ***Have you ever had one of those feel-good moments when you were being praised ~ but you knew that the shoe was going to drop and that praise would turn to something else soon even if you didn't deserve it?***

So here we are, and at this point in the story, the encounter takes a surprisingly negative turn. Things seem to be going along fairly good, but then Jesus quotes two proverbs: one expressing their criticism of his not performing miracles as he did elsewhere. Jesus understands their reaction: they want him to prove himself by doing miracles for them like they've heard about. The other proverb was his comment that a prophet isn't accepted in his own home town.

But the crowd really turned ugly with his next comments, for he talks about God's acceptance of outsiders. He talks about God doing good for those considered "unclean," while NOT doing the same good for the acceptable children of Abraham. His local crowd didn't want to hear that, because he hinted that God has no favorites: they were no better than anyone else! It was hard for them to argue about it because Jesus took the stories right out of the very sacred scriptures that they held dear. These were familiar stories to those men in the synagogue that day, but being reminded of them when they were feeling pretty good about themselves ~ when they were feeling perhaps that they should be rewarded for having this impressive man come from their community ~ didn't sit very well. Surely, they deserved to be blessed because of that!

* *Do you think God saves blessings for those who are somehow connected with other people being blessed? If you do good, do you expect God will bring good to you?*

Ehrman states, "These are the stories that Jesus uses to explain how he fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah. His message is clear: he too is a prophet of God who will not receive a warm welcome among his own people in Israel, who like their ancestors have rejected God along with his prophets. Because of this rejection, Jesus' message will be taken to the Gentiles."

Jesus defends his ministry to outsiders, and the locals don't like that, especially when he implies that they might think they deserve special treatment because of coming from the same community as Jesus and, after all, being the children of Abraham. To be caught by their own scriptures, was too much! They decided to kill him. In Luke's Gospel, this is the beginning of Jesus' troubles. Resentment would rise as he continues to share his Gospel ~ good news ~ that God loves all people, not just the Jews.

* *Can you see the foreshadow of the bigger plot here? Compare this story with the story of Jesus' life. Why did the religious leaders want to get rid of*

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Jesus? Why did his town folk want to get rid of him here?

Ehrman again, “For Luke, this reaction marks the beginning of the fulfillment of the sermon that Jesus has just preached. The prophet of God is opposed by his own people, and they will eventually call for his death. As a prophet, he knows that this is to happen. Indeed, it has all been predicted in the Jewish Scriptures. Rejecting him, the people have rejected the God that he represents. This compels the prophet to take his message elsewhere. Eventually, the message will not simply be to another city of Israel, but to another people, indeed to all other peoples, the nations of the earth.”

As Jesus’ journeys to the cross, he is on a rocky road, and we are invited along. Stay tuned!

CLOSING THOUGHTS

THE LORD’S PRAYER