

Luke 4:14-30 (NRSV)

Then 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.

MEDDLING PREACHERS

You might not believe this but sometimes preachers can make people angry. In fact sometimes we can make people furious. My daddy used to say, “He’s quit preaching and gone to meddling.”

How does that happen? Usually it’s because we don’t live up to the expectations that people place upon us. And often those expectations vary quite a bit from person to person.

I’ll preach a sermon and someone will say, “That was a great sermon pastor, the best I can remember.” And someone else responding to that same sermon will say, “I’m deeply troubled by your sermon, pastor. What you preached last Sunday was a travesty.”

Those two people had different expectations when it came to the sermon. They had different ideas about what I should be saying on behalf of God. Sometimes their “beef” is with me and my insensitivity on some issue. And quite often they have a point. Heaven knows that I not very tactful at how I put things at times.

But, sometimes it became clear that people were angry at the message. Their real problem was not with me but with the Bible.

Unfortunately for people in my profession when people don’t like the message their solution is to attack the messenger. When people hear me talk about this, some try to encourage me by saying, “Well, you can’t please everyone all the time.”

Certainly I can agree with that statement, and though I appreciate the support, I always want to add that though I really like to please people, sometimes it’s the preacher’s job to challenge people. Someone once said that it is the job of the preacher to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

If you do that, if you prick the conscience of someone who is very strong in their beliefs, if you quote Scripture in such a way that cherished ideals are challenged, you may very well provoke an angry response, even from people who know you very well.

A SERMON IN NAZARETH

In our lesson for today we see that this happened to Jesus. Jesus goes to his hometown of Nazareth, and preached a sermon based on Isaiah 62:1-2. In that passage, the prophet described a time when God's deliverance would come to all people, even those people on the bottom rung of society. The poor would receive good news, the captives would be released, and the blind would see. It would be the "year of the Lord's favor."

Many biblical scholars believe that this passage refers to the Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee is described in the 25th chapter of the Old Testament book of Leviticus. It is a year of new beginnings. Every fiftieth year all debts are to be cancelled, all slaves are to be freed and all land is to be returned to original owners.

Through this practice God's people would learn a spiritual lesson. They did not really own anything. God was the real owner of the land, and they were merely God's stewards. (Leviticus 25:23)

Through the years this Jubilee Year came to be associated with the coming of the Messiah. When the Messiah would come it would be like a Jubilee Year. There would be freedom for those enslaved and in exile.

The people to whom Isaiah wrote lived in a time of great expectation. After several generations of captivity the Jews had been delivered from exile in Babylon and were allowed to come home to the Promised Land.

It was in many ways like a year of Jubilee but not quite. Expectations were high, but as it often happens reality did not live up to the expectation. There were still great struggles after they returned home from captivity. In not too many years God's people would once again be under foreign domination and influence.

But, despite their struggles, God's people still looked forward to the day when this age of grace and salvation would truly be a reality. The year of Jubilee was symbolic of a new beginning, and they believed that when the Messiah came, then they would experience this new age. The year of God's favor, the year of God's grace would come to them in a way that they had never experienced it before.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

And so when Jesus the great teacher and miracle worker came to their town, expectations were high. They had heard about what he had done in other places. They could only imagine what he might do in his own hometown. Could he be the Messiah? Dare they dream that Jesus the son of Joseph, a member of their own community was the one who would usher in a new age of grace and freedom?

Up until this time Nazareth wasn't famous for anything. When one of Jesus' future disciples heard that he was from Nazareth, he asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" According to one preacher, being from Nazareth was like being from Hell, Michigan; Bobo, Mississippi; or Boring, Maryland. It wasn't a place to be proud of.

But, now that looked to change. Jesus, their hometown hero was preaching and healing everywhere. He was causing quite a stir. Maybe they even wanted to erect one of those signs by the side of the road as you came into the city, "Nazareth, Home of Jesus the Miracle Man." And so they gave Jesus the privilege of reading from the Scriptures and saying a few words to his people.

Perhaps it was no accident that the Isaiah scroll was chosen for the reading that day, and it was certainly no accident that Jesus found the place in the scroll where this prophecy was written. Everyone in the congregation that day knew that this was a prediction of the messianic age. That's why the Scripture tells us that when Jesus rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him."

This was the moment for which they had waited all their lives. Was the ram's horn about to blow signifying the beginning of the Year of Jubilee? Were they the lucky ones who would be the gracious recipients of God's grace and salvation? Expectations were high that day in Nazareth. They expected Jesus to be the Messiah, and at first he seemed to be affirming their expectations.

Jesus said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The gospel tells us that the people were very please with the sermon so far. If it had been a Baptist church the “amens” would have been overwhelming. They said things like, “He is such a good preacher. He’s Joseph’s boy, grew up right here in Nazareth. We knew he was something special even when he was a boy. He was always such a bright boy, such a polite boy.”

A GOOD SERMON GONE BAD

But, Jesus knew that they were praising him for the wrong reason. He hadn’t come to Nazareth so that he could be a local miracle worker. God had given him a greater job. He was to bring God’s message of grace to the whole world, not just his small part of the world.

And they had it wrong about his heritage as well. He wasn’t their native son. He wasn’t the son of Joseph. He was the Son of God. Jesus had to change their expectations. The people may have nodded and smiled, but they were unwilling to allow the radical words of truth to sink in.

So He made it plain. He told them that prophets are always rejected at home, and that some sometimes foreigners are more understanding and faithful than the people of God.

He said,
“Listen, I know you’ve come to expect miracles from me, but the message I bring is more important than any miracle I might do. I was born here, but I bring a message of salvation that is for the whole world.

Think about some of the stories in our Scriptures. From time to time God even decided to go outside our nation in order to demonstrate his grace.

Think about that widow from Zarephath for instance. Did you ever think about why God chose her, a foreigner to shelter His prophet, Elijah? Did you ever think about why she was the only one to receive aid during a time of famine?

Or, if that doesn't convince you that God sometimes uses outsiders as the vessels of his grace, think about that Syrian commander, Naaman. There were many people who had leprosy when Elisha was a prophet in the land.

But, God chose to heal only Naaman, an enemy commander in order to further his purposes. If ever there was a passage that proves my point this is it. You can't assume that you know what God is going to do next. God's ways are greater than your expectations."

And that's the answer to the question that I ask today. Why were they so angry? They were angry at the idea that God would decide to save poor foreigners and enemies before he would save them. They were angry at the idea that God has mercy upon whom He decides to have mercy. (Romans 9:14-18) For the hometown folks at Nazareth this was just too much to bear.

Matthew Henry, a preacher from the Revolutionary War period got it right when he wrote in his commentary on this passage, "The doctrine of God's sovereignty, his right to do his will, provokes proud men."

In other words, we think it's all about us and what we want and need. Come to our home town Jesus and give us our heart's desire. More than once a person has said to me, "We need to take care of our own people first. Charity begins at home you know." And I say, "Show me that in the Bible!"

A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

It's not in the Bible. The Bible can be shocking in its inclusiveness. The Bible does not allow us to live in isolation, not caring about the rest of the world. The Bible commands to go into all the world, proclaim the gospel and make disciples in Jesus' name. The Bible tells us that God's salvation is often surprising; God's salvation comes from outside the boundaries of what we think is acceptable

Do you remember the story of Jonah? Jonah was called by God to preach to the people of Nineveh, the sworn enemy of Israel. The Ninevites were renowned for their cruelty in the ancient world. Everyone thought that they deserved whatever bad thing might happen to them.

And that's why Jonah didn't want to preach to those people. Jonah not only knew the character of the Ninevites, he also knew the character of God. Jonah knew that God was a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Jonah 4:2) And Jonah didn't like that one little bit. He figured that if he preached a word of warning, these terrible enemies might throw themselves on God's mercy, and God might well be merciful.

Jonah didn't want his enemies to repent.
Jonah wanted his enemies destroyed.

All of us are often offended by the idea that God's grace is extended to those whom we don't approve. Like Jonah, we don't want those radical terrorists who blow up our buildings saved. We want them dead.

And so we are afraid to consult the Bible too much when it comes to our enemies, our real enemies. What was it that Jesus said about our enemies? Didn't he say something about loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us?
(Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35)

And Jesus chose to overcome the anger of his enemies not by killing them but by dying for them on the cross of Calvary. His cry from the cross was not a word of anger but a word of forgiveness. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

If we hear the message clearly, like the people at Nazareth, we too will sometimes become angry. The grace of God when applied to our enemies and to those "other people" who do not think and behave the way we do can often seem more like bad news than good news.

Why were they so angry? Why were the people of Nazareth so mad at Jesus that they went from being full of praise for what he had to say at one moment to wanting to cast him off the nearest cliff and stone him the next?

They were angry for the same reason that Jonah was so angry. The grace of God as revealed in Jesus was just too inclusive for their tastes. One commentator wrote,

“Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced. All of us know what it is to be at war with ourselves, sometimes making casualties of those who are guilty of nothing but speaking the truth in love.”

A PROPHET WITHOUT HONOR

The year of the Lord had indeed come when Jesus came to his hometown. But, it was not what the people expected nor was it what they wanted. It was not just about salvation for their little town or their little nation. It was about salvation for the world. It was a fountain of grace that offered salvation on a breathtaking scale.

The day of God’s salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ was much greater than the small town of Nazareth ... and yet Nazareth was not left out. Nazareth could have also been a part of God’s plan. Jesus did come and preach there ... if only they could have had eyes to see and ears to hear.

But, they were blind and deaf to the message. As John put it in his gospel,

“He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”
(John 1:11)

That’s putting it mildly. His own people not only didn’t accept him; they tried to kill him! They seized him and took him to the brow of a hill on the edge of town so that they might hurl him off the cliff, and then if necessary, they probably would finish the job by stoning him to death.

In essence, the people declared Jesus a false prophet. He was blaspheming the faithful, pious Jew. He was praising the sinful, pagan Gentiles. The punishment for false prophecy is death. And so they try to destroy Jesus.

They claim that he is a false prophet because he wasn't what they expected. He didn't do the miracles they expected. He didn't say the words that they expected.

In their eyes he had to be a false prophet because he just didn't act like they wanted him to act.

Jesus had it right. Prophets are not accepted in their hometown. Prophets are called by God to bring a message that will not be popular.

That's why the prophet Jeremiah whined and cried about God's call to be a prophet.

Israel was already famous for her mistreatment of God's messengers. He knew what it meant to speak whenever God commanded him. It would mean rejection and persecution. (Jeremiah 1:7)

And that's why ministers even today often tell young people who think that God may be calling them to be a preacher,

“If you can possibly do anything else, do it!”

WALKED RIGHT THROUGH THEM

There is something in this story that I hadn't noticed before. It says that the city was built on this hill, this hill from which lawbreakers would meet their fate.

In a sense the city was founded on punishment and a graceless way of life. And that was why they were so angry with Jesus. His radical message of forgiveness and restoration didn't fit with who they were at their core. It didn't fit in with their city's “foundation.”

Their city was built on judgment, and so a judgment was made that day. But, as it turns out Jesus wasn't the one who was judged. It was the city of Nazareth that was judged by their unforgiving ways.

The Scripture tells us that Jesus passed through the midst of them and went his way.

There are several things we can say about this miraculous deliverance. First, as the gospel of John might put it, “Jesus' hour had not yet come.” Jesus had

a message to proclaim and a job to do for his heavenly Father, and though there would come a time when that job would involve sacrificing himself on the cross, that time had not yet come.

But, more than that, the escape of Jesus from this angry mob also represents what happens when people will not listen to God's message of forgiveness and salvation for all people. Jesus passes right through our midst, and we do not lay hold of him. He passes right through us.

He leaves us behind because we are not willing to receive what he has to offer. We might call on his name and ask for miracles, but if we are not willing to forgive others as he has forgiven us, then we are just not ready for the year of the Lord's favor.

As far as we know Jesus never returned to his hometown again.
What a sad ending to a sad tale.

THROWING THE BOOK

Jesus "threw the book" at his hometown people that day. That is, Jesus used the words of Scripture against them.

I wonder. Does God ever throw the book at us?
What does Jesus preach that we don't want to hear?

Luther once wrote that here is a word that first kills in order to make alive, that damns in order to bless. The word of God says the writer of Hebrews is "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

In other words, God's word is sometimes like the surgeon's scalpel. It must hurt in order to heal. It must first cut in order to make us whole.

In Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation," Ruby Turpin is sitting in the doctor's waiting room, evaluating each person around her. Ruby judges herself to be superior, by more than a grade or two, to everyone there,

especially to a poor, unkempt, teenaged wretch seated across from her who is reading a book.

Ruby thinks it sad that the girl's parents did not groom her more attractively. Perish the thought of having a child as scowling as this one.

As for the "ugly" child, Mary Grace, she listens for a while as Ruby chatters out loud about the superiority of poor blacks over "white trash." Then, without warning, Mary Grace fixes her steely eyes on Ruby and hurls her book across the room.

The book hits Ruby in the head and she falls to the floor with Mary Grace on top of her hissing into her ear; "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!"

This, says O'Connor, is the violent, shocked beginning of Ruby's redemption, the catalyst for her repentance and her heavenly vision.

Revelation often begins when a large book hits you on the head.

And so it is with us. Sometimes revelation comes when we're sitting quietly in church, listening to sermons and thinking holy thoughts.

But, more often the decisive moment comes when we're hit up the side of the head by life, when something is said or something is done that cuts us to the quick, when we suddenly see ourselves in a way that is not so flattering.

That hissing child just might be the messenger of God. The presence of Jesus might just come to us in one who brings an unwelcome message. In our anger we sometimes have to ask the question, "Could this be the Spirit of Christ among us? Is God judging something in my life so that I can be truly healed?"

It's hard to ask that question when someone throws the book at us. It's much easier just to get mad or get even. But, God still works in mysterious ways.

You never know where Jesus may show up.
He may even come to our home town.

Amen.