

Luke 4:14-30

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.

A GOOD SERMON GOES BAD

Have you ever seen a good sermon go bad? The preacher starts off well enough, but then he or she says the wrong thing. Maybe the preacher meant to say it or maybe it was just an off the cuff mistake. But, when it happens the mood in the congregation changes. Everyone gets really quiet.

Sometimes a few leaders shake their heads back and forth offering a nonverbal warning. “Don’t go there preacher.”

If you've said something that really offends there may even be a few people who will stand up and walk out.

Fortunately, this hasn't happened to me very often. But, you can rest assured that I can vividly remember the few times when it has happened. No minister wants a good sermon to go bad. We want people to like us. But, sometimes despite our best effort it happens.

As my daddy used to say about some preachers, "He's quit preaching and gone to meddling." I don't want to be one of those "meddling" preachers. I spend hours each week trying to make sure that my good sermons won't go bad.

But, of course you can't please everyone. Sometimes on the same Sunday one person will say, "That was the greatest sermon. It helped me so much." And another person will say, "I'm deeply troubled by what you said. I'm not so sure we can continue attending church here any more."

What's a preacher to do? Sometimes you'll hear a minister say in frustration, "Why, even Jesus Christ couldn't please those folks!" I suspect that would be true more often than you would think.

You may have noticed that in our lesson for today even Jesus had a good sermon go bad. In fact when you look at the biblical record, Jesus often had a good sermon go bad. The people who shouted “hosanna” one week were shouting crucify him the next.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

You would have thought that the folks at Nazareth would have cut Jesus a little slack on this one. After all he was a hometown boy who had grown up to be someone special. They knew the one they thought was his father, Joseph and doubtless they also knew his mother Mary. They knew all about the miracles that he had done in Capernaum.

And so when Jesus was called upon to read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue that day they had their eye on him. Jesus did not disappoint. He choose a passage from Isaiah that spoke of a great salvation.

In that passage the prophet described a time when deliverance would come to all people. Even 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.

Some scholars suggest 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 returned to original owners.

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

That message was very apropos during Isaiah's time. Isaiah prophesied to a people who had lost hope. God's people were in captivity. They were in exile in Babylon. Their homeland had been destroyed, and they were slaves in a foreign land.

And to this captive and discouraged people Isaiah wrote, "A new day is coming. Your salvation is about to arrive. God is going to help you start over. You are going home."

Over the years this promise had become associated with the coming of the Messiah. They thought that when the Messiah came it would be like a Jubilee Year. There would be freedom for those who were enslaved. Debts would be forgiven. The sick would be healed. There would be a way home for those in exile.

And so when Jesus said, “Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing ...” that was very good news. It was the best news ever. The Bible says that they were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” It was amazing grace.

But, that grace quickly turned to judgment. A good sermon quickly went bad. What went wrong?

DISAPPOINTMENT

Jesus didn’t live up to their expectations. Jesus 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.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, this was “like telling them God had become chaplain to the Ku Klux Klan, or that God had passed over a Sunday school teacher who was sick in order to take care of an ailing Hindu.”

You can't assume that you know what God is going to do next. God's ways are greater than your expectations.

No wonder this good sermon went bad.

Can you imagine how angry we would be if someone dared to preach that God's grace extended even to our enemies?

We say that charity begins at home, but Jesus said that sometimes charity begins away from home, and he had Scripture to prove it!

SALVATION FOR THE WORLD

The people wanted to see some miracles in their own hometown. But, the ministry of Jesus was about more than miracles. Jesus was not just a hometown hero. The miracles were just a sign of something greater. The miracles were a sign of salvation and hope that would stretch beyond Nazareth and even their nation.

Jesus was not Joseph's son as they thought. They had it wrong. Jesus was God's Son. And that meant that his mission field was the world. There is an expansiveness to God's grace that many still find troubling.

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.

JONAH AND US

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?

No, it's best not to talk too much about that love your enemy stuff. That's when a good sermon can go bad.

That's when people might actually get up and walk out. Please, don't go. I promise to water down the gospel enough to make it more palatable!

I said that tongue in cheek, but sometimes I think that is what we do. We tweak the gospel message so that our hometown folks might find it more acceptable.

A GOOD SERMON WITH A BAD REACTION

Some seminarians were engaged in a discussion of student sermons in preaching class. One the members had preached last Sunday in his church and had been saddened when a number of his rural parishioners had expressed anger because of his sermon. One man had even walked out before the singing of the final hymn.

Attempting to be supportive and helpful the members of the class jumped in and tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Had he overstated his arguments? Had he spent enough time developing personal relationships with his people? Had he spoken in too strong or harsh a voice?

The crusty old preaching professor listened to the discussion and then said,

“Did it ever occur to any of you that perhaps what he did wasn't wrong; it was right? I'm bothered by the

assumption that many of you seem to have that there is some way to talk about Jesus without getting hurt for doing so.

Let me assure you that none of you are smarter than Jesus. Jesus got into trouble for his preaching; so will you!”

I’m like those seminary students. I would prefer not to get into trouble for my preaching. But, when you preach about a salvation that is so great that even enemies are included, that’s pretty radical stuff.

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.

UNACCEPTABLE

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.

The Scripture tells us that when they led Jesus out of town to execute him, Jesus finally performed a miracle. It was an escape miracle. He passed right through the midst of them and went on 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. Jesus passes right on through, and we do not lay hold of him.

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 kingdom of God.

In verse 19 that phrase “the year of the Lord’s favor” can be translated more literally “the acceptable year of the Lord.” It’s interesting to note that Jesus uses the same word when he tells the home town folk that a prophet is not “acceptable” in his own hometown.

This turns out to be true. The message of Jesus is unacceptable and so the “acceptable year of the Lord” is not a possibility for those who (in some ways) knew Jesus very well.

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

A SHARP SWORD

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. We cannot assume that because we call ourselves Christians and go to church every week that we are God's acceptable ones ... that our ways are God's ways.

It's interesting that the passage which precedes our lesson for today is the story of the temptation of Jesus. All of the synoptic gospels tell this story. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and there he was tempted by the devil.

The devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said,

“To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” 8 Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

To worship the devil means to do it the devil’s way. It is to try and achieve heavenly glory by preaching a socially acceptable, watered down gospel. Jesus rejected that because he knew that God had a different plan. And we should reject that temptation as well.

The problem I have sometimes is knowing why a good sermon goes bad. Is because the gospel is a stumbling block to some? Or is it because I have not been a good ambassador for Christ, causing some to stumble by my own lack of faith and insensitive ways. Unfortunately, I’m afraid that usually the latter is often the case.

But, sometimes, by the grace of God we are called to preach a radical gospel of grace in our hometown. And the message is rejected. The good sermon goes bad.

When this happens courage is required. We must tell the truth in the midst of people who don’t want to hear it.

And this applies not only to preachers but also to anyone who claims to be a disciple of Christ.

The time of testing will come. Will we stand up and proclaim the good news to those who don't want to hear? Or will we be tempted to make this unacceptable gospel more acceptable?

One day the message of salvation will be fulfilled in our presence. The acceptable day of the Lord still comes

Will we recognize Jesus when He comes? Or will we too decide that grace that radical is just unacceptable.