

Jesus Preaches in Nazareth

by Mark Jarvinen

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,*

to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.

²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

²³ Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

²⁴ “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Expectations ran high for Jesus, the preacher, in today’s text. Here Jesus preached a very short sermon that both pleased and disturbed those who heard it. At first the congregation spoke well of

his gracious words, but by sermon's end, his listeners wanted to throw him off a cliff. But not to worry, based on the text, it sounds like Jesus had an escape plan ready – just in case. ☺

JESUS' GROWING POPULARITY

According to Luke, following his baptism and temptation, Jesus returned to the region of Galilee and began to teach and preach in the synagogues of the towns and villages around Capernaum. In **Luke 4:14-15** it says: “... **news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.**” Jesus was growing in popularity. His ministry was making a big splash. There was a buzz about him being the Messiah. This was rarified air for a small town boy from Nazareth. The people in his hometown and the entire region were elated. I remember when the football hero from my small hometown in Upper Michigan was recruited by the University of Michigan to play Division I football. Nothing that big had ever happened in our small town of 3,000. He was the toast of the town. But that was nothing in comparison to the press Jesus was getting.

And so on this particular Sabbath, Jesus himself took a seat in his hometown synagogue to participate in worship. All eyes were on him. His celebrity status had preceded him. The congregation recited the Shema, the confession from **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**, that begins with the words: “**Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.**” After that came various prayers, the reading from the Torah, and finally the reading from the Prophets with an opportunity to preach granted to this reader, often a special guest. On this day, everyone knew the guest preacher would be Jesus.

JESUS COMFORTS THE AFFLICTED

Jesus stood to read. His eyes fell on the verses from **Isaiah 61:1-2a** –

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The passage was Messianic. It highlighted the coming Messiah’s role of preaching and healing that would meet every human need. It spoke of the year of Jubilee, not a calendar year, but the period when salvation would be proclaimed, when those held captive to sin would be released. When Jesus finished reading, he sat down to preach. What would Jesus say regarding this text?

With all eyes fastened on Jesus, everyone waited expectantly for his opening line. How would Jesus connect with his audience? They would not be disappointed. ...

This moment kind of reminds me of the opening lines of **Pastor Robert Jeffress’s sermon in his pre-inaugural message for Donald Trump and his family**, which took place in a private service two years ago at St. John’s Episcopal Church, in Washington D.C. when he compared Mr. Trump to **Nehemiah** of the O.T. You may recall that God called Nehemiah to build a wall around Jerusalem some 2,500 years ago to protect the city of Jerusalem. Pastor Jeffress, said ***“You see, God is not against building walls. Nehemiah kept plowing forward, and I see those qualities in you, President-elect Trump. I believe you’re going to do what’s best***

for this country.” How’s that for a sermon starter? Do you think he had Mr. Trump’s attention?

Jesus said something even more riveting and profound as the opening statement of his sermon - ***“Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”*** The text says in v. 22 – ***“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”*** Wow! This is every preacher’s dream – one-sentence into a sermon and the whole congregation is amazed. The hearts of the townsfolk gathered in the synagogue that day swelled with hometown pride, saying, ***“Isn’t this Joseph’s son? Wow! He is someone special! He played in our streets. He worked for his Dad in the carpenter shop. Who knew that he’d grow up to be the Messiah!”*** Imagine the newspaper headlines: ***“Small town boy makes good!”*** You can imagine the local shopkeeper thinking to himself – ***“This will be great for business!”*** The members of the Chamber of Commerce were already thinking – ***“He’s going to put us on the map!”***

JESUS AFFLICTS THE COMFORTABLE

Ah, but Jesus’ wasn’t done preaching! His audience had first heard words of comfort for the afflicted in Jesus’ words. **But now he shifts gears to afflict the comfortable.** He sensed that the people were content to revel in the good feelings of the moment, basking in the warm comfort of their very familiar faith, with their hometown hero at the helm. The townspeople regarded themselves as the afflicted whom Jesus, one of their very own, had come to rescue. Jesus will handle the Romans and set us all free, they thought to themselves. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus had something completely different in mind as the meaning of his mission.

Reading their minds, Jesus says in v. 23 – ***“Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”*** In other words, Jesus discerned that the people of Nazareth wanted to reap some of the blessings Jesus had bestowed on the other towns in the region. ***“Do a few miracles for us, Jesus. Show us your power. Make our lives a little more comfortable. After all, you are one of us!”***

After listening intently with a growing sense of excitement as to all the possibilities before them, Jesus drops the bomb on his unsuspecting audience saying, ***“No prophet is accepted in his hometown” (v. 24).*** Then he goes on to cite the examples from Scripture of **Elijah**, the prophet, being called by God to feed the widow of Zaraphath (a Gentile) while the rest of Israel suffered from a famine; and how **Elisha**, Elijah’s successor, was called by God to cleanse a Gentile man named Namaan from the disease of leprosy, while many others in Israel suffered from the same disease.

Jesus had made his point. Not only would Jesus **NOT** fashion his ministry for the specific benefit of his hometown, his mission would offer redeeming grace to Gentiles, the world beyond Israel. God’s redemptive love revealed in Jesus would not be exclusively limited to Israel, but would extend to the entire world. Jesus’ ministry would not be compromised by hometown or even national loyalties. His loyalty was to God, the Heavenly Father whose love and salvation was world-wide in scope. This point fits perfectly into the **Epiphany** season, which we have celebrated the past several Sundays.

Epiphany means to “show-forth,” to “reveal,” to “make manifest” the fact that Jesus is the Savior of the World. That’s precisely the point of Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue on this memorable Sabbath Day. Those who had been lulled to sleep in the comfortable bed of an age-old and familiar form of Messianic expectation, that of a Messiah who would deliver them from their Roman captors, were rudely awakened by the revelation of Jesus, the true Son of God, and the radical nature and world-wide scope of His Kingdom.

THE HOMETOWN RESPONSE AND OURS

Within five verses of our text, the people move from loving their hometown hero to hating him. Their initial excitement, amazement and praise had turned into rage. In their anger, they chased Jesus to the top of a hill with the intention of hurling him off a cliff.

Our initial reaction to the people of Nazareth is harsh and unsympathetic. What’s their hang-up with the Gentiles? Why are they so ticked off that God could love them too? How narrow! How shallow! How self-centered and rude! **However, before we go off on the people of Nazareth, perhaps we should look into our own hearts.** Do we really care about the unsaved (the Gentile outsiders in our context)? The Gentiles were to the Jews who the unsaved are to us. Aren’t we often more concerned about ourselves than the needs of those who don’t know Christ? **“What about me?”** people say. **“I’m the one who has cancer. I’m the one whose dear family member just passed away. I’m the one whose children are out of control. I’m the one who lost my job. It’s my health that’s failing, I’m the one who is broke, I’m one who is lonely,** and yet Jesus said

he came to bring good news to **the poor**. **What about poor me?** Forget about the starving widows like the **widow of Zaraphath** and the **diseased servants** of the world like **Namaan**. **What about me?"**

CONCLUSION

All this leads to the question **"Have you or I ever been mad enough at God to feel like throwing Jesus over the cliff?" – to walk away from our faith?** We're a lot more like the townspeople of Nazareth than we care to admit. What happened when the townspeople got Jesus to the top of the hill outside of Nazareth? **Verse 30** says, ***"But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way?"*** Did God miraculously close their eyes so Jesus could escape? That's certainly possible. However, an easier explanation is that in their anger and the ensuing confusion, **THEY SIMPLY LOST THEIR FOCUS ON JESUS.**

Therefore, by application, when we get lost in our own problems and God feels far away, and we feel angry enough to hurl Jesus off a cliff; it means that we've lost our focus on **WHO JESUS REALLY IS.** We've settled for a comfortable, feel-good faith in which all we need Jesus to do is dispense God's blessings to us so we can enjoy the good life. We've lost focus on what Christianity is all about – **THE CROSS AND THE RESURRECTION.** The truly good news starts with the **CROSS.** That's right, the good news starts in and through Christ's suffering on the cross for our sins and continues in and through our suffering in whatever form that takes throughout our lives. This may not sound comforting, but the truth is that you and I will all know suffering of one kind or another while we walk life's journey. But knowing that we have a God, who, in the form of His Son, was

willing to suffer for us, and by His Spirit, who is willing to suffer with us, gives us incredible comfort and strength in the midst of our own hardships and trials. **And so, let's not get caught up with all the questions that arise when our comfortable faith is shaken; all the questions that stem from Jesus seeming slow to help me. Jesus has already accomplished everything you and I need for this life and the next.** Let's not get so wrapped up in our problems and expectations of a good life that we let Jesus, the Son of God pass right through our midst. Focus on the cross. Focus on the empty tomb. Focus on God's love and we'll have all we could ever truly want or hope for. **A-men.**