

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
January 27, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

1 Kings 17:1, 8-16

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

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. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” 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. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

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?” 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.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Showdown in a Small Town

He was from a small and fairly insignificant town in an area known as Canaan in ancient times. He was a peasant worker, not a stranger to manual labor. In fact, he really enjoyed it. God had significant plans for him, and he responded in kind: beginning a bold ministry, confronting governing authorities and the religious elite. Now, you might guess that the description that I just outlined fits two **different individuals** born over 500 years apart. They are both Jewish, and they both had a great impact on the fundamental aspects of the **faith** of those who encountered them. One was a prophet: **Elijah** of Tishbe, in the region of Gilead, later known as Palestine in Greek and Roman times. The other is **Jesus of Nazareth**, the son of a carpenter, who lived during the

height of Roman Rule in the so-called “known world” around the Mediterranean Sea and parts of Europe.

And, both our scripture lessons demonstrate that everybody has to start somewhere. For the prophet **Elijah**, he came from either a town, or an area, of settlers in Gilead. Like Jesus, it was a **humble** beginning. God sent them both Elijah and Jesus into the wilderness and took care of them there. And, very suddenly they moved into their ministries. After performing healings and miracles, Elijah addressed the court of Israel. Jesus was a preacher and healer and addressed the **religious authorities** at every turn, but faced the governor of Palestine, Pontius Pilate, only as part of his trial, suffering, and sentencing.

Long before we get to the Passion of Christ during Holy Week and **Easter**, we are looking at the *Gospel of Luke* as it describes the beginnings of the **ministry** of Jesus. The writer of Luke wants to address those outside of Judaism, so he adds a twist to this story, which you can read in *Matthew* (13:54-58) and *Mark* (6:1-6). The ending in *Luke* presents a major reversal from the beginning verses. This **resistance** to Jesus and his authority kind of sneaks up on us. It begins in a fairly straightforward manner: **Jesus comes home**, arriving without fanfare: a total contrast to his entry to Jerusalem over two years later. Jesus practices his faith and attends the local **synagogue** for worship. As best we know, Jesus was **educated** and confirmed in **Nazareth**. Most of the men there have known Jesus nearly all his life. We assume that a few disciples came with him, but there is no mention of them or his family.

Consistent with most of the Gospel story, we have **no details** of daily life in these verses. We can imagine that a lot more was going on around Jesus: friends and neighbors talking to him and relatives stopping by to see him. But, they are missing because the main points this day were **God’s Word** to **all** people, along with the **declaration** of Jesus that he is the **Messiah**. As you can tell, this is not a homecoming at all. Instead, this story is placed here, because it comes in as a natural progression of the **activity** of **God’s Spirit** as it affects Jesus of Nazareth. The preceding verses described another scene altogether: the **temptation** of Jesus and the forty days in the wilderness. Just prior to that, Jesus was **baptized** by John.

In rapid succession, these events unfold, telling the story of **God’s call** to, and claim on, Jesus. He responds by taking his mission and ministry all the way to **Jerusalem**. But, before he starts that, he brings his **core message** to his hometown. By selecting the verses from *Isaiah*, as a guest reader in the synagogue, he proclaims that he is the **Messiah**, the Anointed One of God, the One who proclaims the Year of the Lord’s Favor for all of the people of God.

Sometimes called the Year of Jubilee, it is a time of role reversal, of reversal of fortune, and of good fortune for the poor (Leviticus 25). It is a time of rich returns for those who literally have nothing, and a time of proclamation of **goodwill** for all people. Even by itself, this sounds like good news, doesn’t it? Who among us would not want these things to happen: **forgiving debt**, **restoring lands** lost over time, and **eliminating** personal hardship? It is like losing the best job you ever had and suddenly **getting it back** with a hefty raise. Or, as you watch your savings run down, getting a call from the mortgage company that your house is now **paid off**! Most of us can relate to something like that.

Perhaps, for the author of this Gospel, it is enough simply to **proclaim the Messiah** in this way. It is astounding. Regardless, there is a significant **reaction** from the people in the synagogue. At first, they are astounded: such **wisdom** from a common man! But, soon the doubts arise. They know Jesus: They know him all too well. They hear **God’s Word** directly from God’s Son. But, like so many of us they fail to believe what has happened, or that this really is God’s Word for them.

So, as we read this scripture lesson are we not placing **ourselves** in that synagogue? Are we the well-informed people who deny the presence of God, as these townspeople did? This description of events forces us, consciously or unconsciously, to **examine ourselves**, our own system that supports our faith. Does our belief in Christ affect **our decision-making**? Do you and I take actions that are in keeping with the **undeserved forgiveness** that we receive, God's **grace** raining down on us?

At this point, we should understand that this scripture lesson certainly is about a homecoming, but a very different one with Jesus at the center. Paying attention, we can see that it is also about **ministry** and **God's activity** in the world! But, in a matter of moments another proclamation is made: Jesus is the **Anointed One** of God (Luke 2:1-4:13). In the description of the birth story of Jesus, the writer of Luke proclaimed this same message using messengers from God, shepherds, and foreign wise men, or Magi: Truly, this is **God's Son**. But, the townspeople, who know Jesus well, hear the proclamation and **deny** that God is speaking at all.

Well, reading just one story in any of the Gospels is sort of like eating a single potato chip- can you read, or eat, just one? This beginning of the ministry of Jesus also echoes its end: many of us familiar with the Gospel story will carry the image of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the one described at the end of the this gospel as Jesus enters the final week of his ministry. So, in that light it seems odd that there is no great fanfare and celebration accompanying this return by Jesus to Nazareth and the local synagogue. No, it is mundane: a routine **Sabbath** day. There is no spectacle. Just a worship service, a quiet man standing and unrolling a scroll, and then reading a few lines of Hebrew scripture from *Isaiah*.

It all sounds pretty routine, until Jesus speaks: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21b, NRSV). Instead of a day of celebration, the story takes a troubling turn. Not only do the townspeople ridicule him, they leave their worship service and decide to kill him for the sin of **blasphemy**. This dramatic ending is unique to *Luke*: So, there is a special message here.

And, we can start by understanding that **God's Word** is difficult. At times, when we should be glad we frown and complain no matter what we hear. Like the men in the synagogue and the the court of King Ahab, we may want to kill the **messenger**: Jesus or even **Elijah** in the Old Testament verses. This response of anguish and **anger** are natural. We are only human, as the saying goes. When we wanted something to **savor**, whipped cream and a slice of pie, we received something else that we really did not want: a **job loss**, a drop in the our retirement savings, an unexpected and untimely illness, the **death** of a loved one. Our response is pretty predictable. We get angry at the news. We might even react too strongly in anger or fear.

But, because Jesus walked into his synagogue that day in Nazareth, God speaks to us and simply asks us to **listen**. But, like the angry folks who confronted Jesus, even when we hear the word directly from God, we get it **all wrong**.

Showdown in a Small Town

In our scripture lesson, the showdown described in *Luke* came about because of the imperfect people who were there with Jesus. This is not the last time that this will happen. As the ministry of Jesus unfolds and gains support, the **scribes** and **Pharisees** and the Sadducees and the members of the **Sanhedrin**, the ruling council in Jerusalem, all hear God's Word through Jesus and get it all wrong. Eventually, it will cost Jesus **his life**, as it nearly did that day at the edge of a cliff before an angry and unruly crowd of former friends and neighbors.

Unlike a politician declaring for office, Jesus really didn't need the approval of these "fine" people of Nazareth. Jesus knows his calling and not much is going to get in his way. Without explanation, Jesus finds his way through the angry crowd: The part and allow him to leave. This is powerful image, even if the disruption is brief. Nothing was going to slow the steady **progress** of his ministry. And, that is the **best news** that you and I could ever receive. Because, we know **God's love** and mercy through **Jesus Christ**. God continues to speak to each one of us today. And, this only comes to us through the death and **resurrection** of this same Jesus from Nazareth.

Christ did a very routine thing on a Sabbath morning of worship. He read scripture. But, **with God's presence, it became a declaration.** What do you hear **God saying** this day? How is **Christ present** in your life? How do you and I acknowledge **God's Spirit** as being active in our lives and in our living? How does God make a **difference** in you- and me?

Stan Reid © 2019