

January 24, 2010 Sermon Luke 4:14-21

On a Saturday morning, in Nazareth, the town gathered in the synagogue to listen to Jesus read and teach. It was no big deal. He was well known in the area and this was his hometown. He was raised there. They wanted to learn from him. So when he read from the Isaiah scroll, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor” everyone understood the words to be that of the prophet Isaiah.

When Jesus finished that reading he handed the scroll to the attendant and sat down. In that day, it was the custom to stand to read the Scripture and to sit down to teach the people. All eyes were on Jesus, waiting for him to begin his teaching. What would he say about the great prophet, Isaiah? Would he talk about bad news or good news? Captivity, maybe? It was Israel’s ancient history, but it still spoke volumes. They were ready to hear about Isaiah.

But the expected did not happen. Instead, Jesus caught everyone off-guard that morning. He did not emphasize the past, but focused on the present. He did not lift Isaiah up as a great role model. It sounded like he was talking about himself. “Today,” he said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

How did the people react to his words and then to the proclamation that he, Jesus, fulfills the Scripture? Well, first, before he even gets to that proclamation, they speak well of him and are amazed at his gracious words. What will he do next, this man who grew up among them and is the son of Joseph? Jesus gives them an answer, but again, it is not what they expect – maybe they expected him to perform some miracles, for isn’t that what he had done in other places?

Here is what Jesus says to them: “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself.’ Do here also in your hometown the things that we have hard you did at Capernaum. Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” And then, Jesus goes on to share examples from Scripture of two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, that followed God’s command to work God’s favor in non-Jews! What is Jesus up to?

The crowd is even more amazed at his words, but no longer speak well of him. Suddenly, an eerie feeling fills the air, like the feeling you get just before a storm begins and lightning flashes through the air and you smell a sickening, burnt smell. Anger crackles the air and the uproar begins to grow in intensity. Maybe a Rabbi tries to maintain order before it gets too messy, but it is too late. The crowd reacts to Jesus:

Voice 1: You, a prophet? Ha! A prophet of lies!

Voice 2: He says he's going to free us? Who does he think he is anyway? Hey, son of Mary and Joseph; beat it!

Voce 3: Get this troublemaker out of here! Out of town! We need to get rid of him!

Can you imagine this scene as those who were once his neighbors rush at him with fists raised and anger seeping from their pores? Strong arms grab him and yank him from the seat from which he taught and proclaimed such blasphemous and heretical words. They shove him out through the narrow door at one end of the synagogue with everyone following behind him, screaming and whistling. The crowd moves toward the cliff, as if all together they have one thought – to hurl him over and be rid of this teacher who dares to proclaim with such authority that he fulfills the Scripture!

Where would you find yourself among the crowd? Would you be the voice of reason, the voice that says, "Hey, let's stop this madness and think about what it means if this is the one who fulfills Scripture"? Maybe it would have been easy to get caught up in the madness of the crowd, in the misunderstanding of what was happening.

This scene might remind you of something else. Does it remind you of a time in Jesus' future, when another crowd will seize him and holler out, "Crucify him," with hatred and drag him toward death? And we find ourselves within that crowd as well.

Amidst the chaos and the anger and the unbelievable way that Jesus' hometown treats him stands a word of promise and hope. Did you hear it? "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus speaks with authority because it is from God. Jesus speaks with authority because it is a spoken promise to the people and it's spoken to you. It is a promise that is not fulfilled by what you do, but by hearing the Word! And do you know what else? It may seem strange the way Jesus commented to the people, as if he wanted to provoke them, but he said exactly what the people were expecting! Jesus knew the people of his hometown, not like we know our neighbors, but Jesus knew their hearts and minds. And Jesus knows you.

Amidst the chaos of the world, hope continues for Jesus passed through the crowd that day and went on his way. Jesus passed through the pain of death on the cross, in the midst of you and me and goes on his way to the resurrection of new life. And it is also a promise for you. Jesus passed in the midst of you and me and goes on to prepare the way because it has been promised with a Word of authority that God loves the world so much that he gave his son to die for us and that whoever believes this Word will have eternal life.

Today this word is fulfilled in your hearing.

Helpful Resources:

1. Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad's sermon "Today" from January 21, 2001
2. Rev. Brian Stoffregen's Exegetical notes on Luke 4
3. Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Evils of Pride and Self-Righteousness"
4. *A Certain Jesus* drama on "A Prophet in His Own Land"