

“In the Prophet’s Hometown”

Luke 4:21-30

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I want to begin today at the end of the Gospel passage. We read these words: “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.” They – the residents of Nazareth – nearly *killed* Jesus that day. This occurred very early in the ministry of Jesus. It is the first attempt on his life. It is, of course, not the last.

The question is: *what happened* that led these people – who had known Jesus for nearly three decades, who had watched him grow up, who had attended worship with him for years and years – *what happened* that led these people to want to *kill* him? What had he said, what had he done, that was *so offensive*, so egregious, so outrageous, that these worshipers were ready to take the law into their own hands, turn into a vigilante mob, and commit *murder*? What motivated such incredible *rage*?

Jesus is in Nazareth, his hometown. Nazareth was – and still is – a small city in northern Israel, about 12 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It is situated in a little valley, surrounded by hills. That explains the reference to the “hill” and the “cliff” that are mentioned in Luke’s Gospel. We don’t know for sure *which* hill the townspeople led Jesus to, which cliff they wanted to throw him off, though for many centuries Christians have thought that it happened here, on this large hill just south of Nazareth, called “Mount Precipice.” Today there is a park on top of this mountain, commemorating the event.

But the story doesn’t begin high up on this hill; it begins in the synagogue down in the city below. We heard the first part of this story last week. Jesus stood up to read; he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah; he read a brief passage from Isaiah 61: “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.” Jesus was saying, as I explained last week, that the Spirit of the Lord was upon *him*, that *he* was the one who would be bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed; it was *he* who would be proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor. So far, so good. Nobody objected to any of that, though he surely raised some eyebrows. They were learning that this Jesus – whom they had known from childhood – was *different* than he had been before. They were also aware of the rumors about him – teaching in synagogues, attracting large crowds, healing people of their diseases. So far their opinion of him is still favorable. Luke says: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” There is no indication yet that anyone listening to him was feeling any ill will towards him. But seven verses later, these same people are ready to kill him. A lot happens in a short time. The hearts and minds of these people *change*.

It is Jesus who pushes the envelope. First he says this: “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’” That was a common proverb – not from the Old Testament, but there are versions of that saying in both Jewish and Greek literature of the day. It’s not entirely clear why Jesus says this. Was he suggesting that some people might think he had gone crazy, and was in need of healing? If the rumors were true, that he could heal people, then shouldn’t he be able to cure himself?

Next he says this: “And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” This one is easier to understand; he is suggesting that there are some people who want to see him perform the same kind of miraculous deeds of power that he has done elsewhere, like in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. They want to see a *sign*.

Then he says: “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” There are a couple things to note here. First, Jesus is clearly and unequivocally calling himself a *prophet*. He is placing himself in the grand tradition of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, of Elijah and Elisha, of Amos and Micah and all the rest. He is saying, “I am a prophet, just like *Isaiah* was.” In making that claim, he is saying that he is in tune with the Almighty in a way that the common people are not. That in and of itself is enough to cause some people to start feeling on edge. What gives him the *right* to make that kind of claim? The accepted religious leaders were rabbis and priests and scribes, and there were formal processes that those people had to go through to gain their religious authority. Jesus had done none of that. Sure, he had studied the scriptures on his own; he impressed the rabbis with his knowledge and wisdom; but he had not been *trained*; he did not have the appropriate credentials or certification to become a religious leader in the normal sense. There hadn’t been any *real* prophets since Malachi, 400 years earlier. Anybody who claimed to be a prophet would immediately be viewed with suspicion.

The other thing to note here is that Jesus is saying that he is not *accepted* in Nazareth, his hometown. Is he making a statement, or a prediction? Does he know what these people are about to do to him? Or is this a self-fulfilling prophecy – are his actions going to *create* the result that he is describing? Because if he goes on talking in this way – claiming to be a prophet, talking – some might say *boasting* – about himself, maybe even being deliberately offensive – he *will* wear out his welcome.

So at this point the tension level in the synagogue is surely rising. Jesus has *completely* interrupted the flow of the worship service. Remember, he had taken his seat in the pews by this point; everyone is staring at him; and *he just keeps talking about himself*. Fairly arrogantly, some might say.

And he doesn’t stop! There comes a point when one really ought to shut up. But not Jesus. He is conveying the attitude that what he has to say is more important than whatever the rabbi was going to say. He’s Jesus, the very Son of God, so *of course* that’s true – but these people don’t know that he *is* the Son of God. They see him as a disrespectful, and maybe deranged, intruder in their worship service.

“The truth is,” says Jesus, “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.” Jesus is referring to a story that is told in 1 Kings 17, a story that should have been familiar to these people, if they knew their scriptures. The story talks about an extended drought in the land of Israel. The crops failed, and there was a famine. The word of the Lord comes to the prophet Elijah; God sends him to a widow living in a place called Zarephath, near the large city of Sidon. He stayed with this widow and her son for many days, miraculously causing their food to not run out, and miraculously restoring the son to life when he

died. What's significant about that story is *where* it took place. Sidon was not an *Israelite* city. It was a Phoenician city-state, north of Israel. It was a *foreign country*. The widow wasn't a Jew. She was a *Gentile*. As Jesus points out, there were *plenty* of starving families in Israel. God didn't send Elijah to any of those *Israelite* families. He helped some *foreigners*, in a foreign land. Jesus is *deliberately* being provocative, telling the people of Nazareth that the grace of God extends beyond national borders, that God loves foreigners *at least* as much as God loves native-born Israelites, that non-Jews are *at least* as entitled to food and health and miraculous deeds of power as Jews are. That was a *bold* message.

He goes on. "There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." Another example, this time from a story told in 2 Kings 5, about Elijah's successor, Elisha. Naaman was the commander of the army of the King of Aram. Aram was a country bordering Israel, in what is now modern Syria. Aram and Israel were not always on good terms; indeed, Aram sometimes carried out raids in Israel. But Naaman, their great military commander, had a terrible skin disease, and there was no one in Aram who could heal him. So he went to Israel, asking for mercy, bringing with him a large offering of money. The Israelite king wanted to turn him away, but Elisha had mercy on him and healed him. The result was that Naaman came to believe in the God of Israel. Jesus drives the point home: there were many people in Israel with skin diseases during the time of Elisha – and the *only* one who was cleansed was Naaman – a Syrian, a Gentile, a *foreigner*. Jesus is saying, again, that the grace of God extends beyond all human boundaries. That means that any attempt to *contain* the grace of God within any specific group of people, or within any national borders, is *antithetical* to the Gospel. It is an *affront* to the grace and mercy of God.

This is what pushes the Jews in the synagogue to the breaking point. "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." Jesus, of course, escapes; "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." His hour had not yet come.

You might say that Jesus' one-and-only sermon in Nazareth was a failure. The people in his hometown were unwilling to accept his message – but it still rings out through the centuries, across the seas, to any who are willing to listen. *The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not intended for just one people, one cultural group, one ethnic heritage*. The grace and the mercy and the love of God are available to *all* people, *everywhere*, *anyone* whom the Lord our God shall call. Christians have no business setting up boundary lines between groups of people, because Jesus Christ *breaks down* boundary lines. Christians should never use language like "us" versus "them," because *all* of us are made one in Christ Jesus. *All* of us – Jew and Gentile; Israelite, Sidonian, and Syrian; Black, Brown, and White; native-born English speakers and people from distant lands who might not know any English at all – God's love is for *all* of us. There is no room for prejudice or bigotry in the Church of Jesus Christ; that is *completely* antithetical to Jesus' whole message, to his whole *ministry*; indeed, to the very nature of God, who made *all* of us in God's image – whatever we look like, whatever language we speak, whatever country we come from.

The people in Nazareth refused to listen to that. They were too prejudiced, too self-centered, too nationalistic, too unwilling to accept the bold truth that God can – *and does* – love people *who aren't like them*. They rejected Jesus and his message. They turned their back on the Gospel.

May all of us who call ourselves "Christian" today never make the same mistake....

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