

SECOND READING: Luke 4:21-30

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²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³He 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.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵But 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; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers^[a] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

This is the word of the Lord... THANKS BE TO GOD.

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 1:4-10

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"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." ⁶Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." ⁹Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

This is the word of the Lord... THANKS BE TO GOD.

“God is God!”

Well, today we study part two of Luke’s story of Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth. If you recall, Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, read words from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, the words known as the Messianic promise. It announced that One would come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Just before taking his seat, Jesus announced to the congregation that, *“TODAY, the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Well, it seems that the congregation was initially amazed and very impressed by these grace-filled words of Jesus. But then, things took a different turn. Scholars think something must have been said which challenged Jesus. Either the people requested that he favor them, performing miracles for them, his hometown buddies, OR they expressed their doubt that he, a hometown boy, could ever be God’s anointed, and demanded that he prove himself by doing some miracles just for them.”¹

Regardless, Jesus responded to their egoism, their expectant self-interest, and then went on to, in essence, deliver this message: *“Remember, when God came to us during the time of the great prophet Elijah, when there was a great food shortage in the land, there certainly were many famished Jewish women. But God’s prophet gave food to none of those hungry Jewish women, but only to a Gentile, pagan woman.”* You can almost feel the mood in the room change, can’t you? The initial admirers in the room likely became silent and sullen, and the initial doubters felt boldly vindicated. Jesus continued, pointing out once again that not a Jew but a Gentile was given preference by God. I paraphrase...*“And there had to be lots of people suffering from various illnesses during the time of the prophet Elisha, but God’s prophet healed none of them. Only one, a Syrian Army officer!...That was who God healed!”* Well, this seems to have been a breaking point. Israelites felt the same way then about Syrians as they do now. Luke tells us that when they heard THIS, they were so enraged that they all got up and tried to throw Jesus off a cliff!

¹ Warren Carter. *“Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. 4th Sunday after the Epiphany”* In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, Cynthia Rigby, eds. *Connections* Yr C, Vol 1 (Louisville: WJKP; 2018), 220.

Yikes. I'm sure there's been negative reactions to some of my sermons over the years, but never has anybody tried to murder me because of my preaching!² I suppose there's always a first time for everything. Regardless, the behavior of the congregation in Nazareth brings one to ask "*What were they expecting?*" or maybe, "*Why were they expecting something different?*" For the Scripture is completely full, replete with God's plan for salvation of the whole created order, not simply the Jews. God told Abraham that "*by his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed.*" (Gen 22:18). Isaiah said that "*the people of Israel were a light to the nations so that all the world would be saved.*" (Isa 49: 6b). Even the call of Jeremiah was to tell him to speak to the nations! (Jer 1:4-10). But yet, the people got so angry when the preacher reminded them that God had often done compassionate wonders not for them only, but for Gentile, outsiders.³ You'd think they'd have not been surprised to have this pointed out. And in addition, you'd think that they'd come to simply expect the unexpected from "The Great I am", from the One whose voice came from the bush that did not burn, from the Holy One of Israel, from YHWH. A famous rabbi once said, "*Judaism is a rather simple religion that is based on two profound articles of faith. One, there is only one God. And Two, you are not it.*"⁴ You'd think they'd not reacted like this.

Most biblical scholars believe that what was happening that day was that the Jews in the Nazareth synagogue was something else entirely. They were blinded and deafened by what was going on in their lives. They came to the service with a preconception of what they would hear. They wore their tinted glasses and their ear buds which played their own music, and they were wearing their emotions on their sleeves. It's easy to understand, really. Israel was God's chosen people, waiting for a promised Savior, yet for centuries they were also the victims of the cruelty of other nations. Even now, the Romans were choking the very life out of them. So, they created a story which was more in line with what THEY thought they needed, what God should do for them. It made sense to them, and they'd told it so often, they'd forgot that it was

² Will Willimon. "*What Did they Expect?*" https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtcZoGSE5Tef8l7sEGH_uiw (accessed 2/1/19).

³ Willimon.

⁴ Quoted in Willimon.

not God's story. It reflected a lack of imagination, and frankly, a lack of faith. The story went something like this, "*God WOULD be faithful to them above all others. They were special, and the Messiah would come with guns ablazin' to set THEM free. The Messiah was to be no mere messenger of grace like this tame Jesus was, but the Messiah would be a political leader, a military hero who would take on the power of Rome.*"⁵ They'd argued about how exactly this would happen. They'd debated it at the local diner and Hebrew school. Rabbis weighed in, cherry picking other pieces of scripture and mitzrah to support it. If they'd had TV stations, they'd probably broadcasted something about it day and night. Divisive, political groups like the zealots, were forming, of which Judas Iscariot was likely one, and seeds were being planted that eventually would result in a battle against Rome. Sadly, the base problem in the synagogue that morning was actually fear, manifested in spiritual amnesia, blindness and deafness.

So... instead of hearing the word, which would have expanded and enriched their minds about who God was and what God was up to...instead of hearing the word proclaimed by the preacher and shaping their agendas from IT...instead of humbly and joyously receiving the grace that their big God had extended to others ...they brought their already formed ideas of how God should be and how God should act and were disappointed to hear something different. Their disappointment resulted in denial, in defiance, and eventually in rejection of the messenger, the very messenger for whom they were waiting all these years. **Imagine. Imagine what peace they'd known. Imagine what power they'd have had. Imagine the clarity they'd have experienced if they had only seen and heard who was in their midst. Imagine!**

Friends, it is a difficult time in our nation, in our world, a very difficult time indeed. It is a difficult time for American Christians to keep our eyes and ears focused on the Gospel, letting it, and it only, shape our approach to the issues of the day. It is difficult for us not to become influenced by the cacophony of perspectives, of positions on troubling subjects coming at us seemingly 24/7. It is frankly hard to withstand the political polarity of our culture which is often undergirded with various degrees of imagined or very real fear. And the result is that we

⁵ Blair Monie. "Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the Word. 4th Sunday after the Epiphany" In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, Cynthia Rigby, eds. *Connections* Yr C, Vol 1 (Louisville: WJKP; 2018), 221.

easily can begin to absorb others' stories as our own, and we can get so immersed that we have trouble discerning an independent identity. More than ever before, as a pastor, I hear believers finding it hard to identify themselves first as Christians instead of members of a political party, as Right, Left, Moderate, whatever. And, certainly, the waters of baptism affirm for us that how we see and act begins and ends with how we understand our identity, who and whose we are.

And so, Christians all over this country come to scripture in our churches on Sunday mornings or in our times of devotional reading, often poised, subconsciously, but still so often poised to hear what we expect to hear, what we want to hear. Like the Nazarite congregation, we are then sometimes spiritually blinded and deafened. We erroneously try to fit the Gospel to our story, and we reject IT if it does not fit. We sometimes get the flow of information going backwards....the arrow going the wrong way. (*point from self to Bible*). The story, the agenda, the interpretation, is in these times put in a position as the superior authority.

So, as hard as it can sometimes be, and it can be challenging brothers and sisters, we instead need to come to Scripture ready to listen and learn. We need be still and ask the Spirit for strength to mentally discard our preconceived positions, to discard them, to leave them at the door, outside our heads, and then let the Spirit enlighten us afresh. As John Calvin says, we need to each time put on the "Spectacles of Scripture".⁶ **Then....then...the truth, once discerned, can, should, must be applied with the Spirit's guidance to our lives in the world, and preachers and congregations should function to do this together and then go and do. Preachers and congregations should do this together, but always the arrows must begin in the right direction.**

Now, not always will we come away feeling warm and cozy. We may hear a "'No,' *that is not how it will be,*" "*No, that is not who I am*", or "*NO, my child, you are wrong! That is not consistent with my law of love!*". I sure have heard this, and I've been disappointed. We may have really invested ourselves in our stories. But GOD IS GOD and we are not! Yet, yet as Rev Will Willimon says, "*we will always know that IN the written word we have been with the true*

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Calvin%27s_view_of_Scripture (accessed 2/1/19).

*and living Word who has chosen to be with us, who has died to be for us...and that is, in itself, very good news.*⁷ So true. *(repeat)* That is the gospel, itself, friends. **Imagine. Imagine what peace they'd known. Imagine what power they'd have had. Imagine the clarity they'd have experienced if they had only seen and heard who was in their midst. Imagine! Amen.**

⁷ Willimon.