

Luke 4:21-30

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "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.

Good morning, again. Boy what a difference a week makes. Last week I was getting calls, and texts, and emails wondering whether we would be having services because of the snow and ice and this week, yesterday, my neighbor's children were outside in shorts playing in one of those big blow-up bouncy houses. What a great world we live it.

Well, this morning, I feel like I have to introduce our Gospel passage with: "welcome to the continuing saga of Jesus returns home, part two." Last week we heard about part one. Jesus had been out in the countryside doing and teaching amazing things. Finally, he came home and was greeted with open arms. The home town hero was home and Nazareth was back on the map. No one will ever ask again whether anything good come out of Nazareth. They probably would have had buttons made with Jesus' picture on it and had the high school band playing, if there were such things.

On the Sabbath Jesus went to the synagogue, just as you would have expected. He stood up to read, which was his right as an adult Jewish male, and was also probably expected by the town folks. He was given the scroll of Isaiah and read, *"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."* Then he sat down. So far nothing too controversial. They had heard

the passage many times. They knew that it was about the Messiah and establishing for all time the Jubilee, the reset of all things to their original state, that they had been practicing for, for over 70 generations, since they entered the Promised Land. They understood that the eternal Jubilee would be brought by the Messiah someday. That is what they had been practicing for and waiting for. But then Jesus added the conclusion that was not in Isaiah's words and had never been added before. "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Today, in Nazareth, in their own synagogue, the fullness of time met the fulfillment of the promise.

Well, if Jesus had stopped there, everything probably would have ended fairly well. They may not have fully gotten it, but they would have probably gone home, somewhat disappointed by the lack of physical miracles, pondering the implications of his pronouncement.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He saw something. He saw something in them. He saw something that had become ingrained in the Jewish experience and life, that was ingrained in the human experience and life. I don't know. Maybe it was a sense within the crowd that God existed to serve and bless them instead of them existing to serve God and be a blessing to others. Maybe, he saw them waiting for him to get the show started, to get to the action, to get to the works instead of the words. He had been doing great things out in the country and they wanted some of that "amazing" for themselves. The tour had come home to Nazareth and so this show should be extra special. Maybe he just saw their lack of faith and their attachment to the physical instead of the spiritual. I don't know what it was, but one thing I do know is that his message abruptly changed.

And here is where we need to be sure to put back on our 1st century ears, like we did last week. We need to hear the message that they heard in order to understand the truth that Jesus was teaching and what it was that turned a loving congregation into a murderous mob.

So what happened? Well, with three stories, three examples, Jesus held up a mirror to the people of Nazareth. The first one was not so much a story as it was a statement of fact that would have carried with it a reference to baggage that the Jewish nation had carried with it for a long time. It was a history of prophet bashing and prophet killing. No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. No prophet is accepted within the people to whom he was sent.

In the mirror that was being held up, they would have seen themselves in the face of their fore-fathers; hounding the prophets, hating the prophets, killing the prophets. They would have seen their ancestors ignoring God's message because it wasn't fitting into their plan. Ignoring God even to the point of God finally saying to them, "OK, have it your way," and then because of that finding themselves in Babylon as slaves. That was an uncomfortable mirror and an uncomfortable message for them to hear. They didn't like it and they took offense.

Jesus went on. He pushed the mirror closer and talked about the widow in Zarephath. Just the reference to that widow would have stirred things up even further. They would have heard something like, "Remember Elijah? Do you remember Israel when Ahab was king and he

decided that new temples would be built throughout the country and that in those temples Baal would be worshipped? Do you remember how God stopped the rain for three and a half years because of how Israel turned away to idols? Do you also remember how God only stopped the miracles within the nation of Israel, within his hometown? He continued to act outside of Israel, like with that Syro-Phoenecian widow and her child. Do you all remember that?" Things were really going too far now. Was this guy saying that they were like the Israel of the past?

"What about Elisha?" Jesus continued with the mirror. "What about how Israel continued to walk separate from God. There were many in Israel at that time who were suffering from leprosy, but God only healed a Syrian general."

Truth can be a tough thing to hear. It pushes buttons. Sometimes it offends people. Have you ever wondered what buttons Jesus is pushing in our world today, in our culture today, in our lives today? Truths like: we are often more concerned about looking good than being good. Truths like: often our wealth and comfort gets in the way of our understanding of our deep need for God. How about: the truth is that we so often judge others harshly, dislike others intensely, and divide ourselves from others constantly? You know what I mean. I'm on Facebook. I see it every day. How about the truth that truth is optional, especially when a good lie is so much more effective and expedient? It's an election year. What mirrors are being held up by Jesus for us today?

These are important questions for us, not just for a nation but for individuals because we are about to transition into a new season where a mirror will be our most important tool. We are about to enter into a time where we are called to look inwardly, assess honestly, and then choose faithfully.

Lent can be a challenging time for us. It is supposed to be, by the way. And Lent, if done properly, can make us uncomfortable. The truth we find can even offend us. It is a time when we struggle with the fact that although we want a Savior, we really don't want a Lord. We want the baby in the manger, but we are offended by that baby, as an adult, holding up the mirror. We want the grace, but we recoil at the necessary obedience. We want true Godly joy, but we don't want the transformation that brings it.

Lent teaches us that we can't have one without the other. A Savior that just grabs us out of our dilemma without showing us how not to fall back into our problem makes it just about us and minimizes Christ's sacrifice. Focusing only on the baby in in the manger robs from us the understanding of why God had to take on human form in the first place and then die, as a human, on a cross. When we eliminate obedience, we make grace a dictate, something that is imposed on us, rather than an offer, something that we must accept and grow into. Without transformation, joy is simply a fleeting experience of worldly happiness that is redefined with each generation and within our various contexts.

The coming Lent is not just a time to give up chocolate, pat ourselves on the back, and get on down the road. Lent requires a mirror. Lent requires a deep mirror that looks deep into our soul. It requires that we look at ourselves by looking through Jesus, and then we get to decide: will what we find bring us closer to Christ...or will we too be looking for a cliff to throw him off of?

Amen.