

“At the Start of His Mission”

Luke 4:14-30

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Scripture: Luke 4:14-22

These last few weeks we've been studying Jesus' formative life, starting with his birth at Christmas time, then looking at that early time in his childhood when Herod oppressed the Jews and tried to kill the children and Jesus and his parents fled to Egypt. We saw them come back again and Jesus grow up in a normal life as a carpenter's son. We saw how Jesus and his parents went to the Temple as was the custom and when he was twelve years old, Jesus stuck around in the Temple to study with the teachers, learn from them and discuss with them. We saw Jesus baptized at the River Jordan when he was thirty years old by his cousin John, where he heard the voice from heaven say: "You are my beloved Son."

Last week, we saw how even Jesus couldn't know who he really was just by somebody else telling him, even if it was a voice from heaven. Jesus had to go into the wilderness and for forty days he wrestled and was hungry and tested and he discovered a few things. He discovered who he really is and he discovered what God he really worships, and what he can expect, what we can all expect from God.

Today in our scripture lesson, Jesus faces sort of a fourth test: when he goes back home, the question is, at home will he stay true to himself and true to his God?

Listen for the Word of God ...

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 favour." 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?'

## Sermon:

Now let me stop there for a minute. There's nothing so sweet as a hometown kid succeeding. It makes us all feel good. When we read the Lake Forester and see the neighbor's daughter was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, we're thrilled for them. When we see our friend's son and his best friend get their picture in the sports' page, we burst with pride. So we can picture the people of Nazareth not just thinking "well this is Joseph's boy, we all know him", but also thinking this is Joseph's boy, we know him! We're proud of him! They welcomed Him back with banners and a parade. They think this is wonderful, his name is spreading across the whole countryside and bringing honor to their town. They give him the place of honor in the synagogue, ask him to preach, and wait with baited breath for his inspiring words. And they are not disappointed.

He opens his inaugural sermon with this good news: his agenda is to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the captives and oppressed, and healing to the ill and blind. Like a presidential candidate who is reading the concerns of the public, he has nailed it. He is the man they've all been waiting for.

Can you imagine how tempting it was for Jesus to just stop there? We've been learning these last few weeks how human Jesus was. And let's face it, we all want approval. We all crave praise. But there is no praise we crave more than the pat on the back from our own people. The weirdest feeling I had was this last Easter when my parents were in the congregation and I preached what I thought was a pretty good sermon. I had lots of great responses. When we went home after church and Mom and Dad came for dinner and Dad says to me, "I have a theological concern about your sermon". My heart just sank! All the praise from the congregation just didn't matter anymore after I heard that! A day later when we had a chance to talk and it turns out he really did have a great thought and it wasn't a criticism, though that is of course what I assumed it would be. No, he had a thought about the sermon, he actually heard it and thought about it and in the end I was touched by that. But there is nothing like those closest to us in terms of the approval and the admiration and the praise that we seek. The people we love – those are the ones we want to hear a good word from most of all. So can you imagine what it was like for Jesus back in his home town in the synagogue in Nazareth? Can you imagine how good it felt for him to hear these words, "Isn't that Joseph's son? We know him, he's so wonderful and we are so proud." So Jesus could have just ended there.

But he didn't. Here's the rest of what he says:

Scripture: Luke 4:23-30

He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town 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 home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for 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.

What went wrong? Why were they so enraged? It may not be obvious to us, sitting here 2000 years later, just what was at stake in his message, so let me try to explain. It may be easier to relate to than you might initially suspect.

Jesus' time was an age of globalization in many ways like ours. Beginning with the Persian roads and Greek and Roman empires, travel and trade became astonishingly easy. Now when that happens, there are benefits and costs. The benefits are obvious: access to more goods and services, the free flow of culture and ideas, and opportunities you wouldn't have dreamed of in an earlier time. But there are costs, too; and the greatest cost is the diminishment of clear values and identity. Who we are is a much easier question to answer when it's just us sitting in our protected corner of the world. When we run into hosts of other peoples, each with their own values and cultures, it's harder to hang onto our own.

The good people of Nazareth lived in just such a time. But the one thing they could count on, the one thing they could hold onto in their changing world was this: God had chosen them. They were God's people. All the way back to Abraham in the book of Genesis, God had called them alone as his chosen people.

What Jesus tells them that is so offensive is that they should not expect special treatment from God anymore. He even quotes scripture to justify his position: when the prophet Elijah lived, he wasn't sent to Jewish widows who were starving from the famine; he was sent to a foreigner, a widow from Sidon. And when the prophet Elisha lived, he

wasn't sent to Israelites who needed healing; he was sent to heal a foreigner, Namaan of Syria.

It would be as if someone had gotten up in our church during World War II and said, we want to pray for the Germans and the Japanese because God is reaching out to them. It's as if I would get up today and told you that the American flags in the sanctuary should be replaced by flags from North Korea and Iran. It was not an easy word for them to swallow.

So why did Jesus say it?

Two reasons, I think: first, remember that one of the things Jesus learned in the wilderness was who God was and what he could expect from God. And what he learned was this: God doesn't promise protection from difficulty. And God doesn't promise favored treatment. God promises his *presence*. And the God who made the heavens and earth, the God of all creation, is going to be present for *all* of his children, not just for some. Jesus' mission is going to be shaped by this good news; that it's not just the Israelites but the Gentiles who are going to be welcomed. It's not just the righteous, but the sinners that he's going to eat with. It's not just the beautiful, but it's the broken, the ugly, the sick, those in pain, the mean - everyone we would rather not include. These are the very people that Jesus reaches out to because he knows more than anybody that they desperately need to be saved. Thank God for it.

And the second reason Jesus dared to say what he did that day in his home synagogue is this: Jesus didn't need their approval anymore. Now I don't know about you, but that is a stunning achievement. And it is the hallmark of spiritual maturity. Let me be clear: I'm not talking about being provocative or opinionated without caring one whit one anyone else thinks. That's all too common! No, I mean *knowing who you really are ... knowing who God is that you worship ... and being true to God and yourself*. That, my friends, is spiritual integrity.

In the weeks ahead, we'll have a chance to hone our own integrity, as we walk through the season of Lent. I invite you into that journey, here, at our church, or at the house of worship you call home.

Integrity doesn't come overnight. It takes courage and prayer and great clarity. As for me, I'm not there yet. But I know I have a guide who has been there: Jesus, who was true to himself and his God. And for that, I am deeply, deeply grateful. Amen.