A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“The Fulfillment of Scripture”*

Luke 4:14-30

February 3, 2019

When Jesus speaks, he speaks with the tongue of men and of angels. That was the unanimous impression of his early listeners. He’d just come from a wrestling match with the devil in the desert. Now here he is going from town to town in Galilee on a speaking tour of sorts. He comes to Nazareth, his hometown. When the people heard him there, all grown up, they were, to say the least, impressed. At least at first.

Everyone was. Each of the four gospel writers has their own way of getting the point across that early in his ministry Jesus won their hearts and minds. In Mark’s gospel, the people early on say to one another, “He teaches like he has real authority, not like the scribes.” In Matthew’s gospel, everyone from lepers to centurion soldiers came to him asking for his help. In John’s gospel, even skeptics like Nathaniel trip all over themselves to fall at his feet, “You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!” Early on, Jesus made a definite impression on everyone. This guy is good!

In Luke’s gospel, the scene is the synagogue in his hometown. All he does here is read scripture. It’s not that Jesus preached an innovative message. He simply stood to read scripture. But maybe it was the way he did it, the way he carried himself like he owned the space he inhabited in the world, in contrast to the way most people either sort of apologize for existing or try to own everything around them but themselves. Maybe it was some grit in his teeth and in his voice from his trials with the tempter. Whatever it was, when Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah, it wasn’t ancient history anymore. It was the living Word of God. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

He read it like God meant it and meant it for such a time as that exact moment. Then he just stopped, mid-sentence if you know your Isaiah 61, rolled the scroll, handed it to the attendant and sat down. It was a mic drop moment. Never before had the reading of scripture seemed so alive, so pregnant with vitality. Not even when Ezra read for hours and the people wept, cut to the heart. Not even when Josiah heard the scripture read and rent his clothes. Not even when Moses came down the mountain and read to the people the words of God etched on stone tablets by the finger of God.

Jesus reading was lightning flashing across the Nazareth sky. A moment’s silence. Then the thunder rolled. First the lightning, then the thunder. He said to them: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Isaiah, Isaiah 61, that’s the scripture Jesus said was fulfilled in their hearing. It’s a magnificent piece of prophetic hope for a people who had suffered and were ready for some relief. All the promises in Isaiah 61 are great reversals of fortune for suffering people, both as literal examples of suffering people and as images of emotional and spiritual suffering. For the poor, good news. For captives, liberty; for the blind, sight. For everyone caught in systems of injustice and inequality, for everyone who has made mistakes, the year of jubilee: restoration of what should be in a world that is far from it.

All of that sounds amazing and the fulfillment of that sounds even better, and the claim that a boy from Nazareth is the one who will bring this about is astounding to them. They marveled. Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing? That’s Joseph’s boy, right?

He speaks with the tongues of men and of angels. They were, to say the least, impressed. Honestly most of us would call that a good day, shake some hands and go home. But Jesus isn’t impressed that they’re impressed. The crowd thinks he’s great, at that moment. But he knows something about them they don’t know yet about themselves. They will turn on him. Quickly. Though I’m not sure even Jesus realized how quickly. He just knew for sure they would turn on him. And he told them so.

It had something to do with prophets in their own hometowns, that much is clear. He said, “No prophet is acceptable in his hometown.” And I guess that’s true. Familiarity may or may not breed contempt, but it does breed dismissal. When you get familiar with someone you don’t see anymore how they might surprise you, might shake things up. They might not always go along to get along and they might challenge you. I think that’s what Jesus is getting at and we know there’s some deep truth here. And some risk.

I’ve always taken one of the highest compliments I’ve ever been given to be on my last day as pastor in rural North Carolina after being in the church for four years. One of the long-time members of the church and the community, one of the ones for whom no change could come slowly enough, and it would be just fine if it never came at all, shook my hand on my last Sunday and said to me, “Preacher, you aren’t from here, but you could have been.” I don’t know if living here in a town where people are more mobile can allow you to appreciate what a compliment that is in a place where the only people who come are preachers every few years and the only ones to go are the young people who move away looking for work. “You aren’t from here, but you could have been.” That was after we’d been a part of integrating the congregation, started an English as a second language ministry, and rejected the local community pool which unofficially restricted access to members of a certain race. Knowing the challenge all this had been for him over those years, I took it as not only a high compliment, but also a gesture of grace on his part. You’re not a hometown boy but you could have been. I would not have traded that compliment for anything.

Jesus had it right there in his grasp, even more because he actually was from there. He grew up there. They knew his folks. He’d been away for a while, wrestling with demons and all, but now he was back. Though he was changed, he was still the same ol’ Joseph’s boy. You’re from here, and we’re proud of you. Most of us long to hear that so much we would do anything to hear it. Jesus had it until he threw it all away. Oh, what could have been for him had he just been a good ol’ boy, a native son doing good things affirming the same ol’ friends and throwing rhetorical stones at the same old opponents. If he had just followed the script, he wouldn’t have been great, but he wouldn’t have been crucified either.

He tossed it away by turning to their own scriptures. Isaiah got him admired. 2 Kings got him almost killed. Of all the great forerunners in scripture he could have turned to in that moment I don’t know why he picked these. He could have gone with Moses, framing himself as the new liberator of the people from slavery. Actually, that’s more or less how Matthew’s gospel presents him. He could have gone with David, as the new King of Israel. That’s more or less what the image of the Good Shepherd conveys. He could have gone with Adam, how he’s the new Adam come to renew creation. That’s more or less how Paul sees him. He could have gone with Aaron, and let them see him as the new high priest of the Temple mediating between the people and God. That’s more or less how Hebrews sees him. He could have chosen as his model so many forerunners that would have set a happy course for his ministry, but he turns to Elijah and Elisha, and then zeroes in on two of their miracle stories that seen from a certain angle posed uncomfortable questions. Jesus forced them to see the stories from exactly that obtuse angle.

Elijah healed Naaman, **the Syrian**, Jesus seems to say in all caps. Elisha helped the widow **from Sidon**, Jesus highlights in yellow. Foreigners, both of them. You can imagine in Jesus’ pocket Bible those two details had been circled and highlighted. Those details said something important to Jesus about the character of God’s mission in the world, and his own.

Why did the great prophets do their God-inspired things for foreigners when there were plenty of people right here, their people, their hometown people. Why did they do it for foreigners when they could have done it for their own? He holds up the story right in their faces: there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah during the famine, but Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a woman in the land of Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel for Elisha to help, but he only cleansed Naaman the Syrian.

The realities that Elijah and Elijah only healed foreign people, enemies even, seems to be a detail of those Old Testament stories that Jesus puts front and center. It’s as if he is saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to suffering people, and some of those people are not who you think they are; they are outsiders, people you’ve quarreled with, people you disagree with, people you want nothing to do with. The good news is also for you, but only if you’re able to see how the gospel is not good news for you instead of them, but good news for you and for them. That may not always mean it will be easy for you, but God’s love for the world isn’t bound by your provincial horizons. God’s love for the world is for the world.” And it always has been, even in your heroes. You just haven’t been able to see it. God chose you to be the light of the world for the world. I’ve come to help you do just that. That day in the synagogue, Jesus spoke with the tongues of men and of angels, and also of love. Had he not, he would have been just one more clanging symbol, one more noisy gong in the orchestra of human self-satisfied interest. That cacophony had played long enough.

As you know, this got him in no small amount of trouble even at the beginning of his ministry. This experience with his hometown people is a foretaste of what’s to come. It’s not just that a prophet isn’t honored in his hometown; a prophet like Jesus is hard to embrace for long anywhere without being challenged to the core of your being.

This story is invitation to us to see Jesus with fresh eyes. If he becomes too common, we become too comfortable with him, and are incapacitated to appreciate him, not just appreciate him, but really see him for who he is, and thus, who he is calling us to be. With Jesus, really with anyone you love, there is a gift of familiarity and a gift of unfamiliarity, to knowing someone intimately and realizing the ways they are still a mystery. With God, this dialectic is of the highest order. Theologians speak of knowing God intimately and then of how we cannot know God at all. They speak of the way of knowing God that is sensory and about gaining knowledge and about increasing in intimacy, and they speak of a way of knowing God that is an emptying of everything you think you know. They call it the kataphatic and apophatic way, the via positiva and the via negativa. The way of knowing and the way of unknowing. The wisest among us recognize that you can’t have one without the other. The way of knowing by itself leads to arrogance; the way of unknowing by itself leads to despair. Each way dead ends without the other. They go together, knowing and not knowing, familiarity and strangeness. Speech and silence. Definition and wonder. Spiritual growth and humility. God is ultimately, intimately present with us and ultimately, completely Other.

What it means for us, at least in part is this: those townspeople who wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff, that was a terrible thing, but you might find yourself a little sympathetic for them on some of your not-best-self days. If you never want to throw Jesus off a cliff, you’re either a holy saint who has transcended your human self-interest and ascended dispassionately into the higher dimensions of the human soul, or you’re probably not really listening to him. If you never drop your Bible as if lighting just struck you, you aren’t reading carefully. If you never want to turn away from the church in disgust at its scandals or in frustration at its hypocrisies, you don’t have sight of what the church is supposed to be. If you never feel the weight of your own sin and your own complicity in the problems of the world, you don’t know yourself, or you don’t know Jesus very well yet.

The way of Jesus is so challenging -- him and the whole gospel, and the whole of the scriptures, and the whole of the life of the church -- so challenging that if you can take it all in without feeling a pinch, an ouch, a whoa, then you might not have been listening. With the gospel, there is always a cross. For goodness sake, when we baptize you, we act like we’re drowning you. That ought to remind you that Christianity is not benign.

When it comes into a person’s life, the gospel brings conviction. We are brought face to face with uncomfortable truths about ourselves, and about our way of living. The response to that isn’t to chunk it away because it hurts, but it is confession, repentance, and prayer for redemption and redemptive living for yourself, your church, our world.

That’s not to say there is not great joy. What great joy there is to know that God is love and that we are loved beyond measure, that there is a meaning for all our lives and that anything, everything can be redeemed. There is nothing in a person beyond redemption by God’s grace. It is called good news for a reason. But it always comes with a price.

Each of us will be called to sacrifice something. We are called to sacrifice all for Christ, but there will be something in particular where it will hurt the most. Usually that has something to do with other people. Somewhere as we grow in the gospel, a relationship will be challenged. Either a relationship you have that needs to be transformed, or a relationship you have refused to have that needs to be engaged, or a relationship you once had that needs to be renewed.

God is love. Without that love, anything else we do is judged to be worth nothing. Divine love isn’t just an ever-expanding warm blanket of comfort. It’s raw, challenging, sometimes severe, always costly. It is a sacred fire that burns within us, purifying our personal loves that they may become holy as Christ’s love is perfectly holy. For those townspeople who wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff, they were quick to grasp and reject the implication of his teaching. He was communicating to them that his way was an embrace of enemies and opponents, so they reasoned quickly that he must be an enemy and opponent, and they wanted him gone.

Jesus escapes their grip, for now, but they will get him in the end. Those parts within us that cannot bear to hear the gospel will get him in the end, but even that won’t be the end. The gospel cannot be stopped like that. Not even the cross can end God’s reckless, boundless, refining, holy, redeeming love for all the world.

May you have the grace to receive the whole gospel and by it, receive transformation in the way and image of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

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