

No Prophet Is Acceptable in His Hometown
Luke 4:14-30
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CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 4:14-30

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction: "But he's only 15!"

Several years ago I returned to Ft. Lauderdale where I had spent some time after college when my parents lived there. My brother invited me to a church that had recently been planted and was doing really well reaching out to the city and preaching the gospel. The pastor of the church did a great job and I was really impressed by the worship and the people, but I couldn't get over one thing. The pastor's name was Brad and he had been in the High School youth group at my dad's church when I was in college. So here I am almost 20 years later, but I can't get over the fact that Brad, who in my mind is still a quiet freshman in High School, has started a church and is a fantastic preacher and a very effective church planter. I just remember remarking to my brother, "how is he doing all this, he's only 15?!" But, of course, he was in his mid-30s and had a really wonderful ministry going.

I have the same reaction when I visit friends that I went to college with. My best friend from college, Doug, started and runs a marketing company in downtown Waco where he employs like 20 people and has huge accounts with companies in Central Texas. I shouldn't be surprised – Doug is a very intelligent, accomplished man with great leadership skills – it's just hard for me not to think about all the times we were yelling at referees at Baylor games or drinking Dr. Pepper and belching, or talking about girls, all the stupid stuff that we did in college. And now he's this VIP businessman in his community? I'm certainly on the receiving end of this phenomenon as I hear from my parent's friends: "I remember when you were this tall and now you have 4 kids and two in college?"

This is the dynamic that Jesus encounters when He returns to His hometown. His hometown, of course, is Nazareth, where He grew up; not Bethlehem where He was born. The people in His hometown knew Him when He was a kid and when He was doing carpentry work as a young man. They knew His family, His parents, and all of His siblings. And they think there's nothing special about that family. There's no mystical spiritual anointing, they're just an average, maybe less than average, Jewish family in this small town. How could Jesus be teaching and preaching and doing miraculous spiritual things? There's an old saying, "You can't ever really go home again." Usually what it means is that things change and what you remember about your family, your home, your town will only disappoint you. Well, Jesus went home and things hadn't changed a whole lot, but He didn't have a great time. They couldn't accept who He was and what had become of His life. As we look at the text, maybe we'll see that we have some of the same issues of not really understanding Jesus and the nature of His ministry.

The first eight verses are about when Jesus went to worship and did what He did everywhere.

I. The Fulfillment of the Scriptures (vv. 14-21)

¹⁴ And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. ¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He

unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Let’s have our first practical application from this sermon come from right up front: Verse 16 says, “as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day.” If Jesus’ custom was to go to worship every Sabbath day, would anyone argue that His followers are not expected to do the same? I’m not talking about people who are physically unable, or when things are uncertain as they are during this COVID era. But we live at a time when the definition of a “faithful churchgoer” has changed. It used to be that a faithful churchgoer went every week unless they were sick or out of town. Nowadays, apparently, you can call yourself a “faithful churchgoer” if you attend twice a month or less. Thom Rainier, a man who monitors church trends in this country, did a survey where people considered themselves regular attenders if they made it to their church worship service three out of every eight weeks.¹ That’s not enough. Again, this is such a weird time and we have people quarantining and not comfortable coming; we understand that. But when things open up again, we’ll be challenging you to follow Jesus’ example, and go “old school” with your regular attendance – every week when you’re physically able. We need you here engaged and growing in the Lord, we need you to use your gifts to bless and serve the body, and we all need the fellowship and encouragement of the saints to grow in our faith. We come, we grow, then we go, right?

Apparently, it was customary to have a reading from the Prophets near the end of a Jewish synagogue service in those days. It was called the *haphtarah*, and any young man from the community could do the reading and say a few words about the passage.² Apparently, Jesus took that opportunity at every synagogue that He could, as verse 15 says that He taught in all their synagogues. And He was very well-received up to this point. I love how dramatic verse 20 is: Jesus read the words, rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Every eye was fixed on Him, waiting for Him to say something. I ought to try that some time. And I’m sure that some of you would love for me to preach for one sentence like He did too!

Just as a passage from Isaiah 40:3 had defined John the Baptist’s ministry well (“*A voice crying in the wilderness*”), so this passage from Isaiah 61:1-2 defined Jesus’ ministry well. [Keep in mind that there were not chapter and verse breakdowns back then; that didn’t happen until the 13th century AD, so only the last 700 years.] Jesus went right to these words, which meant that He was so familiar with the book of Isaiah, and really all of the Scriptures, that He knew exactly where to go. He selected this Scripture to declare to His hometown folks that He was the fulfillment of it. He was claiming to be God’s anointed One, the Messiah, since the text said that the Spirit had anointed him for ministry. But really Jesus could have used any text and taught that He was the fulfillment, because all of the Scriptures point to Him. This one was just more obvious and direct about the nature of His ministry.

In verse 18, who are the people that would be receiving the Lord’s favor through Jesus? The people that didn’t really expect it because everyone was so used to thinking that God blesses the

¹ Thom S. Rainier, “The Number 1 Reasons for the Decline in Church Attendance,” found at <https://lifewayresearch.com/2018/12/17/the-number-1-reason-for-the-decline-in-church-attendance/>

² Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), p. 69.

prosperous and privileged. But it would be the poor, the oppressed, the captives, the blind who would be receiving great gifts and blessings from Jesus; they would be the focus of His ministry. Some clarifying questions here:

Is it the literal poor or the spiritual poor who will be ministered to?

Is it the physically blind or the spiritually blind who will be made to see?

Is it the people being physically oppressed or those in spiritual oppression receiving liberty?

The answer is: Yes. It's both-and; Jesus saves us in all of our need. We don't make the error of saying that the Bible's message is all about helping out our fellow human beings, and that works of social action are the only things that matter. But we also don't go to the other extreme of saying that we should only be focusing on spiritual change and ignore people's physical and material needs. Our greater need is to be spiritually saved, in right relationship with God. But that doesn't mean that we ignore people's physical needs. James 2:15-17 says, "*If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*" And Jesus would model that balance by ministering to both the spiritual and physical, as He healed the blind and cast demons out of the oppressed, but also clearly taught the ways of God.

There is a reference to the Year of Jubilee in v. 19, "*the year of the Lord's favor*" - do you know what that is? It's described in Leviticus chapter 25- every 50th year was a year when slaves were set free from their servitude, debtors were released from what they owed, and land was restored to its original owner. Incidentally, the debtors and the slaves were usually the same, because people sold themselves into indentured servitude as a way to pay off their debts. So, is Jesus saying, "It's been 49 years, I'm here to announce that next year everybody goes free and gets their land back"? No, Jesus is saying, "I am the Year of Jubilee. I am what the Jubilee represents, what it points towards. My work is restoration and freedom from oppression." Jesus' ministry, spreading the good news, proclaiming liberty, was the very essence of Jubilee.

How did the congregation receive Jesus' one sentence sermon? Initially well, but then they doubted.

II. The Rejection of the Hometown Prophet (vv. 22-27)

²² And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³ And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself." What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" ²⁴ And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. ²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

Initially, it seemed that Jesus' sermon was well-received, the people had gracious words. But Jesus sensed that they were doubting who He was. The Gospel of Mark (6:2) records that when the people were asking "*Is not this Joseph's son?*" that it was connected to their doubts: "*Where did this man get these things?... How are such mighty works done by his hands?*" They had known Him and His family their whole lives, they considered them just regular people of their village of fewer than 500 people. Carpenters, lowly manual laborers don't get to act like spiritual experts, right? In the first chapter of John, Nathaniel said, "*can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" Perhaps the people of Nazareth owned this and believed it as much as any outsider. It's also likely that people remember the circumstances of His birth, they still believed that Jesus was illegitimate, having been

conceived out of wedlock. So, it was a way to mock Him: “We know that guy from *that family*. We remember the scandal that they tried to say was a ‘virgin birth,’ no way God is working through Him now.” This prophet was not acceptable in his hometown, they thought they knew him.

Verse 23 says that Jesus realized what they were thinking about Him, both their doubts and their desire for Him to perform a miracle here in the same way that He did in Capernaum. Luke has not included an account of what Jesus did in Capernaum, but Matthew did – in addition to teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, Matt. 4:23 says He healed “*every disease and every affliction among the people... they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them.*”

But Jesus would not produce a miracle on demand. Instead, He cited two Old Testament stories of how the prophets, Elijah and Elisha, could have done miracles and wonders in their homeland, but chose instead to do them in foreign lands. Elijah stayed with the widow from the land of Sidon, which was outside of Israel, and helped her and her son stay alive. (We studied that passage last Spring.) Elisha could have healed lepers inside of Israel, but healed a Syrian. These examples are Jesus saying, a) you don’t deserve my miracles because you don’t believe me, and b) don’t be surprised when my ministry extends outside of Israel.

This is a reminder to us: If your faith in God is dependent on Him intervening or doing something miraculous right when you want Him to, you will be sorely disappointed. God will act when He chooses. If you demand that He cure your ailing mother or get you out of a bad situation or get you the job you really want, and if He doesn’t jump right to it that you will stop believing in Him, that is not faith, that is presumption. That’s a lot like last week’s “do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Read the last 5 chapters of Job if you think that God owes us explanations or actions on our timetables.

I’ve never been physically attacked for something that I said in a sermon, but then again, I’ve never claimed to be God’s anointed One. The next three verses show

III. The Wrath of the People (vv. 28-30)

28 When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. 29 And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. 30 But passing through their midst, he went away.

In the history of overreactions, this one seems to rank pretty high up there. Jesus’ friends and neighbors grabbed Him and marched Him out to a cliff to throw Him off. I don’t know if they were still angry about the “I fulfill the Scriptures” line, or the fact that He has put Himself on par with Elijah and Elisha, or that He has insulted them, refused to work miracles for them, and said He would rather bless the Gentiles. Probably all of the above. Deuteronomy chapter 13 had instructions for killing false prophets, so maybe they thought this was Biblically-justified. But verse 30 says that He passed through them and went away. Jesus left and never came back to His hometown that we know of. “Some rejections are final.”³ Sometimes God is the Hound of Heaven, as a famous poem calls Him, pursuing people through the years despite the times they reject Him and flee from Him. Other times, God leaves people alone when they have rejected Him.

So the people wanted to kill Jesus. This is not the first time that Jesus was spared death, as Herod had tried to kill Him when He was a baby. Nor will it be the last time. But this is a similar reason

³ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (Nashville: Holman, 2018), p. 83.

that Jesus was eventually betrayed, arrested, and sentenced to death: because He claimed to be God and because He was doing ministry to the “wrong people.” The mob violence would not work here in chapter 4, but it would work at the end of His life, as Jesus’ fellow Jews yelled for the Roman authorities to “Crucify Him.” Jesus clearly had the ability to stop any violence against Him as we’ve seen in this passage, so submitting to that violence was an act of Jesus’ will – He allowed Himself to be led to slaughter. He allowed Himself to be unjustly sentenced and placed on a cross. Why? Because He loved us so much that He would submit to death in our place. In John 10:17b-18a, Jesus had said, *“I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”* Jesus willingly gave His life on the cross so that our sins would be placed on Him, and so that His death would pay the penalty that we deserve. He gave His life as a ransom for us, fulfilling the Father’s plan and purpose.

Conclusion

Now if I was preaching in some churches that want to be super-relevant and want to focus on helping you live up to your full potential, this would be the point in the sermon where I would say something along the lines of: “Be like Jesus and don’t let anyone keep you down. Your past doesn’t have to define you. Don’t let people’s low expectations or limitations keep you from achieving your dreams! They knew you then, but they don’t know you now, and you have grown and will achieve great things. You tell them who you are and you keep fighting for your God-given mission. People will always tell you that you can’t do it, but God says that you can!” I’ve heard a lot of “cutting edge” churches who want to encourage you to live your dreams and go away inspired to do great things. It’s all fine and good, there’s some truth there, nothing necessarily heretical. But that’s hardly the point of this passage. And taking it in that direction really rips it from being a Jesus-centered passage to being all about what I want to get out of life, with a little spiritual veneer to baptize it.

To me, this is a great reminder that Jesus’ divinity was veiled! That when He was on earth people didn’t recognize anything special about Him. He didn’t walk around with a halo, you couldn’t tell that He was from God. As Isaiah 53:2 predicted: *“For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.”* So people who saw Jesus in the flesh didn’t have any idea that He was God. It’s only when He taught deep truths or did something like healing a leper or calming the storm that the Spirit opened their eyes, and people realized, “Hey, this man is sent by God.” But a lot of people, like these people who knew Him when He was young, couldn’t understand or agree with that even when they saw it with their own two eyes; their unbelief, their spiritual prejudices, blinded them.

Sometimes Jesus is just too familiar or we already feel like we know who He is. Do you know the actress, Letitia Wright? Most of you would recognize her from *Black Panther* as the scientist sister. She told an interviewer that five years ago, she knew that she wasn’t living a fulfilled life, but didn’t know what was missing. She said, “I didn’t know that missing piece was Jesus. I didn’t want anything to do with Jesus, actually. Especially as a young Black person, you think, ‘Oh man, it’s a white guy, I don’t want to worship that.’” But after seeing a few friends turn their lives around after becoming Christians, she started giving Jesus a second thought. She said that observing her friends’ faith helped her realize, “That’s what my life was meant to look like.” She made a deal with herself: “I’ll try Jesus for a year. See what happens. I’m still here and I’m not going back...” She realizes that He wasn’t white, that He looked Middle Eastern and says, “He’s bigger than what his hair looked

like, or his skin looked like, it was about his heart. It's about what he did for us here on earth and how real he is and how real the Spirit of God is."⁴

So, the challenge is that if you are not a believer in Jesus, do you have some kind of misconception about Him, like Letitia Wright did, like His hometown neighbors did? Please ask questions and keep reading. And there are people who grew up in the church who don't realize who Jesus is. You may be like the citizens of Nazareth in the sense that you're willing to grant that there was a historical person named Jesus who lived in Israel for just over 30 years, created a stir with His teachings and activities, and was ultimately put to death by Rome. But you cannot go any further than that. You cannot believe that Jesus was also fully God, that God took on human form, particularly in such an obscure time and manner. But if that's all you're willing to grant Jesus, then you might as well agree with His family in Mark 3:21 – *"He is out of his mind."* Because He was constantly claiming to be God, and if He wasn't, then He was a fraud. Either you take the whole account of the Gospels of Jesus being the God-man who had spiritual authority over all things, or you reject the whole thing as lies and fabrications created by Him and His disciples. There is no middle ground.

But when you realize that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, anointed by God to accomplish the great work of redemption for all of history, for all of humanity, then Jesus can work in your life. You can realize your great spiritual poverty, that you have been dead in your sins and are hopeless and doomed to destruction for your sins and your rejection of Him. Jesus speaks life and good news to you in your poverty. You can realize your spiritual blindness, that you do not understand God's ways until He reveals them to you. And until you believe in Jesus, you are blind to what the Lord can accomplish in your life. You can realize that you were in bondage and oppression to your sin and the works of the evil one, but that Jesus sets you free! You can look at the cross and see Jesus' body sacrificed on your behalf, His blood shed for you -> transition to Communion

Benediction

Philippians 4:19-20 - *"And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."*

⁴ Tyler Huckabee, "Letitia Wright is Finding Joy" found at <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/magazine/letitia-wright-is-finding-joy/>