

Sermon – January 30, 2022
“Is Not This Joseph’s Son?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text; Luke 4:21-30

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and enter the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal. Amen

Good morning, everyone. It is great to see that we have survived another winter storm and are able to be out and about. There are changes happening here at Fairfields with the new floor in the activities building and soon a new roof on the church. We are also about to complete the current Bible study at Fairfields, and we are planning to move to the Book of Revelation for our next session. This would be a great time to fulfill a spiritual resolution to read more of the Bible and to join the study as we move into this New Testament book.

I would like to remind us of the scripture that Jesus has just read to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth. This is the version that is closer to the Hebrew that Jesus would have read, “*Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me; To preach good news to the poor he has sent me: To proclaim for the captives release, and to the blind sight; To send forth the oppressed in release; To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” This is Jesus’ mission statement, a statement that we as the body of Christ, those present in this place, are to continue. We need to try to place ourselves among those in the synagogue on this sabbath day and hear Jesus’ words as they would, so that we can understand what occurs as Jesus teaches in his home

town of Nazareth. Many of those present watched Jesus grow up for the last thirty or so years. Also present are the grown children who played with Jesus as a child. And maybe some present have paid him for carpentry work and now sit at a table or in chairs Jesus made. There are also young men present who went to Hebrew school with Jesus. When they hear Jesus' words telling them he is the fulfillment of these prophetic words from Isaiah, they all are amazed at what they are hearing. In their amazement, they are also remembering the works they have heard that Jesus did in other towns, and they are thinking that since Jesus is one of them, one who grew up among them, he will take care of their needs for healing as he has elsewhere. When they remind each other that this is Joseph's son, they are saying, "We know him and he is one of us. We can now expect to be taken care of before any others are cared for or ministered to." They are expecting that Jesus will teach them as he has taught in other places. There is an expectation that he will heal as they have heard he has healed in other places. There is an expectation that Jesus will be caring for them before he goes to any others. They think their familiarity with Jesus gives them a claim on him. And their reaction is amazement. The Greek word translated as amazement has the additional meaning of beginning to speculate. They are beginning to speculate that the amazing things they have heard of Jesus are now available to them. When they hear Jesus read the words from Isaiah about the poor, blind, and captives, they are putting themselves into those conditions and are thinking that life in Nazareth is about to get much better for them before it does for any others. They are willing to see Jesus as the fulfillment of these prophetic words, but they are placing themselves first on the list of those to be taught, healed, and cared for through Jesus' fulfillment of his mission to the poor, the blind, the captives, and the oppressed.

As the members of the Nazareth synagogue are amazed and expecting great things for themselves from Jesus, Jesus continues to teach. Jesus, one filled with the Holy Spirit, looks into their hearts and then begins to speak very directly to what they hold there. First, Jesus names the proverb that they are thinking, "Doctor, cure yourself." This is a common proverb in the first century Middle East that doesn't mean for Jesus to use his healing ability to heal some issue that is wrong with him, but means Jesus as a healer will first care for his home folks, those in his peer group, those who helped raise him, those in the extended family of Nazareth, before he will go and help others. Jesus makes this clear by telling those who are amazed at his words that they are thinking that Jesus will do for them that which they have heard he did for those in Capernaum.

They are expecting great things for themselves from God through Joseph's son, Jesus. This fits with their parochial understanding of care for family first as seen in their own families and tribes.

Jesus goes beyond what is on their hearts and speaks to the reality of what his mission means for them. He tells them that no prophet is accepted in his home town. Jesus reveals to us that he is a prophet and then compares himself to other prophets, giving examples from the lives and ministry of two of the greatest prophets to have risen in Israel, Elijah and Elisha. Jesus chooses prophets from the time in Israel's history when the people of Israel have strayed far from God. He reminds them that there were many widows in Israel during the days when God stopped the rain in Israel as a warning and discipline to the northern tribes in order to bring them back to God. During that time of great need in Israel, Elijah was sent to a non-Jewish widow to receive care. While there were many Jewish widows whom God could have sent Elijah to care for, God sent Elijah to a foreigner and worked the miracle of provision through her. Likewise, Jesus uses the example of Elisha, the prophet who followed Elijah, and the healing of a foreigner who was sent to Israel for healing from leprosy. Jesus points out that during these days of Israel when they were far from God, God did not heal any of the lepers in Israel, but did heal a Gentile leper through Elisha.

Jesus has several messages for those listening to him in his home town synagogue. First, he is making clear to them that he is a prophet, the prophet that Isaiah is prophesying about. Second, Jesus compares the current time and place to one of the least spiritual periods in Israel's history. And third, Jesus makes the point that the Gentiles, who are so greatly disliked by the Jewish people, are more worthy of his ministry than those in Nazareth who expect to be first in line. By pointing to these great prophets sent in a time when Israel had turned from God; Jesus is telling those with great expectations from him that his focus will not be on them, but that before them, he will care for those they do not even think can be part of God's kingdom. He is telling them the Gentiles are more of a priority, more representative of captives, blind, poor and oppressed, than they are. Jesus does not exclude those in Nazareth from his ministry, but Jesus tells them he is not bound to give them priority treatment. He will follow God's will and direction in his ministry.

Now we get a second reaction from those in the synagogue in Nazareth. Gone is their amazement with Jesus; it has been replaced by rage. Those in his peer group, those who watched him grow up, those with whom Jesus has dealt fairly in business exchanges, now rise up in rage,

venting anger at what Jesus has just told them. They take Jesus out of Nazareth and try to throw him off the cliff that their town is built over. They may be trying to kill Jesus for blasphemy in response to his teaching. They reject Jesus the prophet as he told them they would. Their actions also declare Jesus to have the attribute of a prophet, one who is rejected by his own town.

We should notice that Jesus passes through them and goes on his way. This points to a future time when Jesus will be rejected and killed, but God will resurrect him, bringing him through death to new life, making a way to eternity with God for those who will join Jesus on the way.

Now for those of us who have decided to believe in Jesus, we might hear this account from the town of Nazareth and immediately think that we would never do this to Jesus, so this doesn't really apply to us. But that may not be true. You see, we have this tendency as believers to box Jesus into what we want him to be. We, like the people of Nazareth, decide that Jesus is here to serve us, to make our lives into that which we decide they should be, and we desire to keep Jesus in that box. It is a comfortable place for us to encounter Jesus. But Jesus will have none of that. We may be church people, those whose box for Jesus is to come to church, take Jesus out of our box, sing the hymns, worship each Sunday, maybe fellowship a bit, and then put Jesus back in our box as we return to our homes and lives ready for another week. Jesus will have none of this idea of being boxed up and put away. There is no comfortable place where we can keep Jesus and bring him out on a weekly basis when we are ready. Jesus is still about his mission. Jesus is still looking into the hearts of those who have their eyes fixed on him and their ears open to hear him as he speaks truth to us, but we must open our hearts to hear. We hear the good news about Jesus and we think how good it would be for Jesus to work in our life or in the lives of our family to meet what we see as our needs, but Jesus is not boxable, not containable, not predictable. As C.S. Lewis writes about Aslan the lion in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, a lion who represents Jesus, "he is not a tame lion." Jesus invites those who believe in him to enter into his mission to the lost, captive, blind, oppressed, and those outside who are forgotten or even despised. Jesus invites us to die to self, to be filled with his Spirit, to join him in his mission and to go on the way with him and love those beyond the walls of our comfortable box. Jesus has gone on his way to those we see as beyond the kingdom of God, and he calls us to come and be with him, loving them into the kingdom of God.

The other aspect of this time in Nazareth that we need to keep in mind as we surrender to Jesus' call to join him in mission is that as he experienced rejection, so also, as we join Jesus in his mission to share truth with those who are captive, our efforts will bring rejection. We like Jesus, may face the greatest rejection from those who think they are close to us, family, friends, and acquaintances. When we share the truth of Jesus with them, we should not expect instant acceptance, but a rejection of the truth that we share. We will encounter those who think they see, those who think they are free, those who cannot understand the oppression they live under, and those for whom the good news is but an unbelievable story of ancient times.

Notice that as Jesus leaves Nazareth, he does not call down fire from heaven to consume those who have just tried to kill him. Jesus moves on to bring good news to others, those who may be more receptive, and leaves the Nazareth people to another time and another encounter when extravagant love may change their hearts. Like Jesus, we are to pass through those who will not receive the good news from us and continue on the way Jesus leads. We are to move on to those who are open to the transforming words of God, in Jesus made flesh, while continuing to love extravagantly those whose hearts are yet hardened. It can be very difficult for any of us to look into a mirror that is clear and see what is really there. Truth is not a compliment and it can cut deeply into the lives of those to whom we give it. But we continue on with Jesus, until his mission is completed or until we come to our final rest. Those who reject us may be open to another who comes in the name of the Lord.

Jesus' rejection by those who know him, or think they know him, as Joseph's son, are not loved less by Jesus for their rejection but help make the point that Jesus' mission is to those outside of the boundaries of those who hold to their own view on who Jesus is, what he can do, and to whom he should give care. Jesus' mission is to all people whose hearts are open now and will open in the future. Our mission is to go into Jesus' mission, to be those who will say, "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." We will be rejected as Jesus was rejected, not us but the good news we bring. We, like Jesus in the face of rejection, are to proclaim the good news of truth, and when rejected, go on in our mission with Jesus.

Pray with me: Father, open our hearts to your word that has gone forth. Open our hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to hear anew your call to join you in your mission. Open

our hearts as individuals and as a community of believers to hear your call to action right here, right now. Give us the courage to say yes to your call and to follow you into your mission. Amen.