

**Luke 4:20-30 (NRSV)**

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup> 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?" <sup>23</sup> 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.' " <sup>24</sup> And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. <sup>25</sup> 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; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

## Witnesses, Enemies, Witnesses

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: January 28, 2007

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Text: *Luke 4:20-30*

What a curious passage we have this morning. It follows on the heels of the passage Corey read last week. In that passage Jesus was in the synagogue. He read from the scroll; it was a passage from Isaiah about the one sent to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives who are bound. It is a stirring passage.

And then Jesus made it even more stirring, or better said, he stirred up a bit of trouble. As our passage begins this morning, Jesus lays down the scroll and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus makes the bold claim that he is the one who has come to bring sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. Now, no one knows that he is who he is yet. He's just a hometown boy. One would expect that the people in the synagogue would have begun to murmur. Surely, if I got up this morning and said, "I am God's fulfillment; I am the Christ," some of you would be offended. Others would be looking to have me evaluated by a mental-health professional. In both Matthew and Mark's account of this story, that's exactly what we get. The people hurumph. They say above a whisper, "Isn't this Joseph's son? Aren't his brothers just down the street?" And they immediately took offense at him.

But the account we read this morning, Luke's account, is different. It says that after Jesus set the scroll down and made his exorbitant claim, that they spoke well of him. They were amazed by his gracious words. Their attitude in saying, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" was one of pride. They were quite pleased with Jesus.

Indeed, it's Jesus who seeks to cause offense. "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.'" <sup>24</sup> And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Whoa, they were accepting you, man, until you got a little nasty here. They were cheering you on.

Soon enough it falls apart though. Jesus gets them angry, and they try to throw him off a cliff. None of the other Gospel's recount this murderous intent of the crowd. It's in Luke alone. They try to throw Jesus off the cliff, but he somehow passed through their midst and got away.

What a strange story. What in the world is Luke up to here? What is he trying to bring to our attention?

Most Biblical interpreters agree that one thing Luke was doing was foreshadowing the crucifixion. Just as at the end of the story, here in the beginning Jesus has offended the religious authorities and others. At the end of the story they succeed. In today's case he escapes.

The question then arises, why were the people successful in executing him at the end but not now. Some interpreters answer, It wasn't his time yet. Yes, but what we're asking is, Why wasn't it his time yet? To say it wasn't his time is to offer a weak answer at best.

But think about this. If Jesus had been killed by the crowd at the beginning of things, here in Nazareth at the beginning of Luke, it would have been before he called his disciples. It

would have been before he taught his followers and the crowds. It would have been before anyone knew who he was or the stories he told or the message he proclaimed. Effectively, there would have been no one to bear witness to him.

As sidebar, this passage in Luke is enough to prove that it's not just the death and resurrection of Jesus that matters. What he taught, how he lived, the example that he is, and what he says we are to do are most certainly important. Otherwise he could have just let the crowd have their way and saved everyone a lot of trouble. Jesus' life is as important as his death and even as his resurrection. They are an inseparable whole, a story that requires all the parts.

So Jesus needed to teach. And he needed witness to repeat the teachings and to carry on the story. And that's an extraordinary thing. Someone once said that we are always just a generation away from losing the Christian faith. That is, if there were just one generation in which there were no followers of Jesus, the story would pass into history. Like the Gods of Olympus, or the Egyptian deities, there might be historical accounts, but the telling of the story as a lived religion and a committed way of life would end. Christianity as we know it would be over.

I take that to mean that just as Jesus needed the witnesses he would assemble during his ministry in the Galilee, he needs you and me and others to keep the story alive. Living as a Christian has far more to do with keeping the story alive than it does getting into heaven. Heaven will take care of itself. But every generation of the faithful is imperative for the story and message of Jesus to survive. I like that. Isn't it much more exciting to be the keepers of the story, witnesses, than to be seekers of our own private salvation?

Okay, so Jesus needed witnesses. The story couldn't end yet. That makes sense. But let's take a look at the witnesses he chose. Well, some of them are the very ones who wanted to throw him off the cliff that day in Nazareth. Some of them would be the ones who cried out, "Crucify him," in Jerusalem. Some of them would be his closest followers who would run away and watch from the distance and who would misunderstand him no matter how many times he tried to explain things to them. And in the case of the Apostle Paul, some of them would be people who actively persecuted Jesus' followers. In a very real sense, Jesus' witnesses came from those who had been his enemies. Some, like Paul, had intentionally been his enemies. Others, like Peter—get behind me Satan—and James and John—hey, Jesus, where's the seating chart for the head table—thought they were on his side.

Oh, how glad I am that Jesus chooses his witnesses from among the most stubborn, notorious, thick-headed, stiff-necked, self-interested, arrogant, self-deluded people. Thank God, I can meet the experience-needed section of the job application. I am the perfect applicant.

But there's a catch. There's always a catch. Someone once said that Jesus loves us just the way we are, but also that Jesus loves us too much to leave us the way we are. Jesus loves us just the way we are. But Jesus loves us too much to leave us the way we are.

That helps explain the rather odd interaction between Jesus and the people in the synagogue in this morning's passage. The people were happy with Jesus. They thought he was special. But he understood that there were some things that needed to change, so he prodded the people with some uncomfortable ideas. He wanted them to see something new, and something that would run exactly counter to what many of them believed.

In Luke's version of the story, calling himself the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy did not get him into trouble. But what did get him into trouble was his idea that God was a lot broader

than they thought. That is, Jesus said that God was for people well outside the walls of the synagogue, well outside Judaism. Now let be clear. This was not and is not meant to be anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. Jesus was simply saying that God is a lot bigger than any group or clan. And in fact, people who try to wrap God up as their private possession inevitably become God's enemies, even as they imagine themselves as God's defenders.

Jesus refers to two Old Testament stories to make his point. In the first story there is a famine in the land, and Elijah the prophet is on the run. God takes Elijah out by a brook where for a time the ravens feed him and the brook quenches his thirst. But the brook dries up. God tells Elijah to go to a woman in the land of Sidon, where the famine also was. Elijah asks the impoverished woman for a drink and a meal. She explains that she has but a morsel for her and her son, which she and her son are about to eat and then plan to die. Nonetheless, she agrees to feed Elijah. Because of her generosity, her jar of flour and jug of oil were perpetually full. It's a lovely story, but its underlying point is that there were none Israel so generous. In the second story, Naaman is the commander of the army in Syria. Naaman is highly placed in the army of Israel's enemy. But Naaman has leprosy. For all his wealth and station, Naaman is in big trouble. Naaman learns that there is a healer named Elisha in the land of Israel. To make a long story short, Naaman is willing to go to a representative of the God of Israel for healing. As Luke uses the story, there were plenty of lepers in Israel, but few of them had the faith that Naaman had. In both cases, Luke's Jesus wants to say that God is bigger than many people think, and even more, some of those who most think they have God on their side are more misguided than some people in other lands and of other faiths. It's one's generosity and open-heartedness that counts far more than being in the right club.

Of course, it's not hard to see today's analogue. Especially in the Christian right, there is a real you've-got-to-belong-to-the-right-club mentality. I would be wager quite a bit that if Jesus were to go to many such churches this morning and get up and say, "I am the fulfillment of God's word, and by the way, let me tell you that some of those Buddhists, and Hindus and Muslims and Jews down the street are far more in tune with God than you are." I'm willing to wager quite a lot that they'd be glad to run him off a cliff.

But, my point this morning is not to point fingers. It is to admit that most of us who follow Jesus or any other religious figure or movement get it wrong. We weave our own worst needs and worst selves into the fabric of our religious faith. You can choose the language. We are tempted in the desert by Satan, we are psychologically predisposed to a deluded self-interest, the truth is obscured by our ignorance. Choose your metaphor. The net result is that too often, we confuse wrong with right and use the authority of God to bless our wrongheadedness.

Along comes Jesus. Sometimes Jesus gets in our face and calls us Satan tells us to get behind him. Sometimes he tells us the opposite of what we want to hear. Sometimes he weeps in the Garden of Gethsemene. Sometimes he cries out, "Forgive them for they know not what they do." But never, never, does he leave us alone. He loves us too much to leave us the way we are. And he needs us to be his witnesses.

Luke is a masterful story-teller. In this little scene we've read this morning is found the kernel of the Gospel. "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; Was blind, but now I see." Or at least I hope to be. Amen.