

# Jesus in Trouble. . . Again

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## **Luke 4:21-30**

Today's text is actually a continuation of last week's text. Then we read about Jesus getting up in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth, to speak. He read from the prophet, Isaiah. When we pick up the story today, we see that all the people are quite impressed. They can hardly believe that the one who reads and speaks so well is a hometown boy, Joseph's and Mary's son. You can almost feel the excitement in that house of worship. But then things change – change suddenly and dramatically. Jesus keeps speaking and before long, adulation turns to rage. Before he can even finish, the people not only want to run him out of town, but also try to throw him over a cliff! Where is the pastor-parish relations committee? What has happened? They are angry before he even mentions the church budget.

My guess is that the good people of Nazareth had certain expectations, not only of Jesus, but also of God's promised Messiah. When Jesus speaks of the "acceptable" year of the Lord, or the year of God's favor, it sounds like a reference to the coming messianic age – that time when God would finally intervene and make things right. And again, there were expectations, namely that the Messiah would get rid of the gentile Romans and other oppressors and set up Israel once and for all as God's favored people – blessed with peace and prosperity.

This is what they expect and, at first, this is what they hear from Jesus. He speaks of God's good news of release, freedom, healing. So far so good. But then things begin to change. Jesus, the great story teller, decides to tell two biblical stories - two illustrations of God's saving work. He tells of Elijah's ministry in Zarephath (I Kings 17), and Elisha's healing of a Syrian soldier (II Kings 5). And in a blink of an eye, the people in the synagogue are as outraged and angry as a crowd at a Donald Trump rally. Again, what happened?

In telling those two stories, Jesus reminds the people that God's blessing, freedom and healing are not limited to Israel. It turns out that God also embraces those outside of Israel – Gentiles, foreigners, the stranger, the poor, the other. In the Elijah story, there is famine in the land, but Elijah goes to a gentile widow and her son and provides them with food and feeds Israelites. In the Elisha story, the prophet heals Naaman, a Syrian army officer, of leprosy. He reaches out to and heals, not only a gentile but also an enemy of Israel. Suddenly the acceptable year of the Lord is not so acceptable to the people of Nazareth. In Jesus' vision of the messianic age, all people are loved and cared for and healed by God... all have a place in God's heart, all have a place at God's table.

Now how might we hear these words of Jesus in today's contentious and angry and fearful context? Well, to put it bluntly, I believe Jesus makes it clear that:

- *To exclude entire groups of people from entering our country strictly because of their religious beliefs, is not the way of Jesus.*
- *To refuse to provide a safe haven for refugees – including children – because of where they come from in the world – Syria – is not the way of Jesus.*
- *To threaten to round up people largely because of their ethnicity, to break up families, and send them away without providing any path to citizenship or caring what will become of the children, is not the way of Jesus.*
- *To stand by while an entire city's water supply is poisoned and do nothing – city too black, too poor, too unimportant – is not the way of Jesus.*
- *To talk of carpet bombing entire populations of people, is not the way of Jesus.*

So much that is being done and said in these fearful and angry times is not the way of Jesus. You may disagree with me, but it is what I passionately believe. The way of scapegoating, exclusion, and fear-mongering is not the way of Jesus. But, then again, it is true that the way of Jesus is not always the way of choice, not always the popular way to go. It has even been known to make people quite angry and unreasonable: "When they heard this all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurt him off the cliff."

A great preacher once suggested that a good sermon "allows the risen Christ to walk among the people." Sounds good, comforting, to think of the living Christ walking among us, blessing us

with his spirit. But, as Luke reminds us, it can also be true that when the risen Christ walks among us, well, that's often when the trouble begins. You just never know about Jesus. People hear Jesus preach that the merciful work of God has a wide reach beyond the bounds of their wildest imaginations or deepest fears, and they don't like it at all. Again, sometimes he calms the storm, but sometimes he leads us into stormy seas – invites us to do what we don't want to do, go where we don't want to go, to reach out to and accept those we don't want to reach out to and accept.

I once read about a small, church-related college that had an annual event called Christian Emphasis Week. The student Christian group would invite a speaker to campus who would preach several times and have discussions with students – all aimed at deepening faith and creating a mood of religious revival.

One year, however, the students at this college got more than they bargained for. They invited a speaker whom none of them had heard before, but who had the reputation of being dynamic and exciting. Indeed he was. On the first night of the special week, the campus chapel was filled with the faithful. The speaker began by opening the Bible and reading a passage of scripture. When he had finished, he closed the Bible and then suddenly flung it across the stage and out an open window. The congregation sat in stunned silence. Were their eyes playing tricks on them? Did the preacher just throw the Holy Bible, the Word of God, out the window? The preacher looked at them, then said, "There goes your God," then proceeded to preach a challenging sermon on the difference between worshiping the Bible and worshiping the God who comes to us through the Bible.

Well you might say that Jesus did something equally shocking in his hometown synagogue. At the outset it seemed like a normal service. He opened the scriptures and read from the familiar text – the word from the prophet Isaiah – good news to the poor, release to the captive. Then he added, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And as we have seen, at first the congregation responded warmly, enthusiastically. Heads nodded, people murmured their assent. But then the question began to stir among them: "Just what does he mean when he says, 'Today the scripture has been fulfilled?'" And it was then that Jesus threw the Scriptures out the window... or at least their understanding of the Scriptures. For he dared to proclaim that the words of Isaiah are not only for Israel, not only for insiders. No, God's care for the poor and the oppressed has always been for the outsiders as much as for the insiders. Indeed, when insiders try to restrict God's grace to themselves, they cut themselves off from that very grace.

As my wife will attest, Sunday afternoons go much better around our home when that morning's sermon goes well... or the Packers win – whatever comes first. I'll admit it - I like it when my sermons please you. Over all these years, I am sure I have preached some sermons that displeased everyone, but, thankfully, none of you ever threatened to take me to Bodega Head and throw me over the edge. Yes, I'm a pleaser. But clearly, I – we – serve a Lord who wasn't that interested in pleasing people. Not many hints about self-improvement in the teachings of Jesus. The good news is that Jesus comes to us in the brokenness of our health, in the shipwreck of our personal lives, in the loss of all possible peace of mind, even in the very thick of our sins. He emphatically does not promise to meet only the odd winner of the self - improvement lottery, but instead meets us all in our endless and inescapable moments of losing. But when he shows up, does he tell us what we want to hear? No, he dares to speak the word God wants us to hear – sometimes comforting, sometimes quite discomfiting.

The psychologist, Scott Peck, used to say that people get married for two reasons: to have babies and to have friction. Could that also be a description of effective worship and preaching? First, to give birth – to new Christians, new ideas, new experiences with Christ; but also to have friction – to bump against the truth, to be challenged by a living Lord to see the world and each other with new eyes, occasionally to get jerked around by a holy and righteous God whose ways are not our ways. I guess one could say that anytime Jesus shows up, some things are brought together and some things are torn asunder. That's the fun and the challenge of gathering on Sunday and praying for our Lord to come and walk among us.

This is God at work... at work even now unfolding new narratives with, through and among particular people, people we might never expect, even through and among the outsider. And it may not be the narrative we are used to, may not be the narrative we expected. But I do know this: it is liberating and healing to those who are able to let go of old calcified ways and keep their eyes fixed on Jesus as he moves us beyond prescribed roles and expectations and into a relentlessly powerful story coming alive, right now, both within and on the edges of the human family and our faith community. Thanks be to God!