

## “RUDE AWAKENING AT NAZARETH”

Jeremiah 1:4-10   1 Corinthians 13:1-13   Luke 4:21-30

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The gospel lesson is a continuation of last week’s reading. Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth, attending worship. At first, he seems to be their home town golden boy, but before this Sabbath sermon is finished in this synagogue at Nazareth, the crowd that first applauds Jesus will want to throw him over a cliff.

It’s easy to blame the home-town folks, but a first-time reader of this passage might be struck by the force with which Jesus responds to the seemingly innocent comments from the congregation. True, after Jesus’ reading they say, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” But this could be taken simply as curious awe. Naturally the townspeople would be amazed at the authority with which Jesus read and interpreted the scriptures. Luke even tells us that *“all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”* But clearly Jesus takes their comment not only as an insult, but as a rejection of him—and, as a result—as rejection of a prophet whom God had sent. If the worshippers in the synagogue responded in an extreme way by wanting to throw Jesus over a cliff, it was no less extreme than the insults and rage Jesus first directed at them.

Considering the historical context is crucial if we want to understand what in the world made the people so angry. Nazareth is in Galilee, an area which—in a society where walking was the primary mode of transportation—is a considerable distance from Jerusalem, the political and social center. It was *Jerusalem* where things were happening and trends were being set. To be blunt, Nazareth was (and still is, as a matter of fact) kind of a “hick” town. But it wasn’t your average conservative, provincial settlement. Referred to as “Galilee of the Gentiles” by Matthew, this area was rife with revolutionaries and radical thinkers. For observant Jews—who were by no means the majority—it was a tough town. Daily they had to remind themselves who they were and what they were charged to do as God’s people. Galilee was, of course, occupied by Romans, but for some time before that, it had been under strong Greek rule. To survive as a Jew, it would have been necessary to struggle constantly with any compromising trends or principles that were filtering into their culture. Never could they afford to accommodate Gentile attitudes or Gentile ways. So there was some tension here.

If Kathy preached from the lectionary last week, you probably heard the scripture where Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll about the dream of restoration. It was Israel’s dream that the Messiah would bring good news and bind up the brokenhearted. It was their dream that the Messiah would proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, and that they would finally enter the year of

the Lord's favor. All this was in the reading from Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> Up to this point the crowd was all smiles. They expected Jesus to continue on with the reading from Isaiah 61, but for some reason he stopped, put down the scroll and did not read the next words. Maybe it occurred to you that the crowd turned on Jesus because in saying "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*" he implied that he, Jesus, was the expected Messiah. But it wasn't at this proclamation alone that the worshippers became angry. It was not just what Jesus said, but also what he refused to say, that generated such rage.

You see, the part that Jesus would not read from Isaiah was all about God's vengeance against those who did not trust in God. Part of the next chapter (Isaiah 62) says, "*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations [that is, the Gentiles] shall see your vindication...*"

As people who had lived under the oppression of first the Greeks and now the Romans, the people of Nazareth could well have thought that the bad guys getting what was coming to them was the best part the story. But Jesus didn't read it. Instead, he accused the congregation at Nazareth of being lacking in faith. And worse, he referred to two stories in the Bible where God honored Gentiles *instead* of the People of Israel.

This was going too far! To stand up in the synagogue, recite the most precious dream of the people, and then suggest that it could well be the unbelieving, oppressing Gentiles that would be found favorable in God's sight! This is where the people became angry to the point of entertaining violence against Jesus.

For us, the lesson is unmistakable: God, in the person and work of Jesus, sometimes is manifest in surprising, disturbing or even infuriating ways. If an epiphany is an awakening to the essential nature of things, this may well be a rude awakening. Those who are awakened may not wish to be.

If we really heard the message of Jesus as he meant us to hear it I wonder if we would be as shocked as the hometown crowd in Nazareth?

Jesus proclaimed to the good religious people of Nazareth that God loved gentile widows and enemy generals. For this good news, they attempted to hurl him off a cliff. They just weren't ready to hear it. The gospel offended them, just as it offends us, because it dismisses all our self-righteousness as silly and unfounded. It refuses to recognize the boundaries we invent to place ourselves over others.

This kind of good news does not sound a note of joy in our hearts. We like to think we might be good enough to be in God's good favor on our own merits. We certainly don't want to hear that God is giving away the acceptance that we should have to the faithless and selfish.

The truth may set us free, but it also can threaten and offend. Truth is iconoclastic; it is all too likely to shatter our treasured world views and cherished commitments. Truth, as Jesus tells it, reminds us of our limited understanding and partial vision. Truth, though we may eagerly invite it, is not so easily

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6

received. We begin to understand why the ancient Hebrews believed that if you got too close to God you could get hurt.

So, with all due respect to Aesop, who was the one who said “familiarity breeds contempt,” the reason those gathered in the synagogue reacted negatively to Jesus is not because they were familiar with him, but because of his description of how God’s promises were to be fulfilled. Somehow they had thought that the good news would be *their* good news; that the broken hearts to be healed would be *their* broken hearts. And the liberty to be proclaimed to the captives and prisoners—well, who could such people be but them? After all, their country had been occupied for such a long time. It went without saying that the Lord’s favor was theirs.

How disturbing for the faithful to find out that not only were they not in exclusive possession of God’s promised blessings, but that they themselves often played the role of oppressor! What a shock! What a rude awakening! But this was the truth that Jesus brought that Sabbath day.

How about us? Certainly we want the whole world to share God’s promised blessing, but how much thought have we given to ways we might actually be playing the role of oppressor? The hometown crowd got mad when they realized that the pool of potential recipients of God’s love and grace had been greatly enlarged. Somebody else might get what belongs to me alone!

The year of the Lord’s favor is a new year, far newer than 2013. It is not a new chronology that Jesus brings; it is a new creation. And in this new creation the outsiders are invited in: people like the pagan widow of Zarephath and the stubborn Syrian military commander named Naaman... It isn’t that God goes to the “outsiders” as a sort of second-best plan after we have scuttled the first-best! It is that the mercies of God are far wider than our own mercies.

Here is the good news, if we can bear to hear it: *God is God of all people and not just some. God’s grace extends to all.*

Let us proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Grace, mercy and peace.  
Amen.