

## Luke 4:14-30 Narrative Lectionary 064: Sermon at Nazareth

13 Jan. 13

### “God’s Word Inspires--And Angers”

“And he was praised by everyone.” Well, that didn’t last very long, did it? By the end of this reading those who were praising Jesus are ready to throw him off a cliff. But that shouldn’t really surprise us all that much. A true spiritual message elicits both praise and anger. It elicits praise because a true spiritual message proclaims peace, harmony, and caring in a world where those vital qualities are often in pretty short supply. There is hardness, uncaring selfishness, and an “I don’t really give a damn about you” attitude out there. We *have* to deal with that. Sometimes that ugly reality begins to shape and mold us into its unholy image. And when it does, we begin to become people we don’t really want to be. That’s why a true spiritual message elicits praise from us. It calls us back to our senses; it calls us to be the people we want to be; it calls us to be the people God intends us to be.

But a true spiritual message also elicits anger from us. And for much the same reason. When we are called to be the people God intends for us to be, we are called away from self-centeredness, away from self-protecting hardness, away from the “I don’t really care about all those other people out there” attitude. And we are called toward caring and responsibility for each other. And that just sometimes hits a raw nerve.

It certainly hit a raw nerve in the people at Jesus’ hometown church. When Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll, he stops before what some people at his hometown church might think of as the really good part. He leaves out the verses that speak of foreign peoples coming to tend Israel’s flocks and fields and serve the people of Israel. Instead, Jesus turns to the stories of Elijah and Elisha and how they ministered not to the people of Israel but to foreigners. He calls his hometown folks away from self-centeredness to marvel at the wideness of God’s mercy. This will be a theme for Jesus’ ministry, who will be accused of being the friend of tax collectors and sinners and who will call us to be like him who came not to be served but to serve.

This was not a new teaching. It’s all over the Scriptures. It’s the theme of the prophet Amos and of Paul’s letter to the Romans. And, do you remember the story of the prophet Jonah? Jonah gets mad at God for showing mercy to Israel’s sworn enemy and oppressor, the Babylonians. When Jonah is forced by God to go to Nineveh, the chief city of the Babylonians, and the Ninevites repent, Jonah gets angry, and he’s not shy about telling God why. Quoting that verse that runs throughout the Old Testament, Jonah says I knew that you are a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I knew this would happen; I knew that you would spare them, and I don’t like it.

Jonah did not like the wideness of God’s mercy. Neither did Jesus’ hometown folks. And neither, sometimes, do we, for Jesus calls his church to be like him, to be like God, serving rather than being served and abounding in steadfast love. Jesus is delivering a true spiritual message to his hometown church and to us. And it elicits praise from us. And sometimes, because we can be a bit like Jonah, it also angers us.

But Jesus persists. Out of love for us and for the whole world Jesus persists, calling us to be the people God intends for us to be. Jesus proclaims release from bondage. It's the same message John the Baptist proclaimed. John called it release from sins. In that context we translate it to mean forgiveness of sins. But it's the same word Jesus uses here to proclaim release from bondage, release from all that imprisons us.

That's the true spiritual message I'm hearing from Jesus today, release from all that binds and imprisons me, release from my sins. God says "bind up the broken hearted, let the prisoners go free, for this is the year of the LORD." Jesus says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing."

Today. The very first word that Jesus says on his own as he begins his ministry is Today. And it's going to be an important word throughout this Gospel. When Jesus goes to the tax collector Zacchaeus' house, and Zacchaeus says that he is turning his life around and restoring four fold what he has unrighteously taken, Jesus says to him, "Today salvation has come this house." And to the repentant thief on the cross next to him Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Today. Now. In our hearing. In our receiving of Jesus into ourselves in bread and wine God is empowering us to let Pharaoh go, give him up, let our sins go, and be the people God intends for us to be.