

January 21, 2007

Luke 4:14-30

Sermon: "Oh, It's Him Again!"

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Text: "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

I've probably heard this text preached on more often than about any other text in Scripture. If you go to meetings of Charlotte Presbytery, or any other function of the Presbyterian Church USA, you'll hear it used again and again. Technically, according to the Common Lectionary and the Presbyterian Program Calendar, it belongs right here, on the Third Sunday after Epiphany. Not that that's the only time it can be preached. But it always seems to be in season among certain of my colleagues in ministry, who never tire in their appeal to the young and fearless prophet Jesus tearing up the pulpit in his hometown church, giving the *status quo* and establishment folks a good drubbing for all their hardness of heart.

I've heard this text used to attack South African apartheid, to oppose prison system abuses in North Carolina, and to question the foreign policy of the Bush administration. It's a great text for fiery

political prophets to sink their teeth into, and especially for those in a progressive, anti-establishment-type denomination like the Presbyterian Church USA. I seem to remember it being widely invoked during my college years in order to bring attention to our participation in the Viet Nam War.

And I wonder what it is about this text that makes it so popular among the radicals, and appealing to the anti-establishment types, and all the others who have an axe to grind on someone else's whetting stone? Could it be that here, in the midst of all the odd but familiar passages of Scripture, some people think they have found one that reveals the real Jesus?

“Give it to *them*, Jesus! *We* know what you're *really* all about.”

“We have the benefit of 20 centuries of scholarship and reflection on our side. Not like those poor ignorant country folk in Nazareth, where Jesus was brought up. Where he had been circumcised, and nurtured, and dedicated in the Jewish faith. How

could they have been so ignorant as to not see who he really was?

It'd be different for us, I can assure you!"

Jesus has returned home to Nazareth. And he went to worship in the synagogue, "as was his custom," Luke tells us. And he chooses his text from the Prophet Isaiah:

*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.*

Isaiah 61:1, 2; 58:6

These words were as familiar to Jesus' hearers, then, as Luke's words are familiar to us today. Jesus is not acting the part of the rebel, the outsider, the political fly-in-the-ointment when he reads to them. When the congregation wonders, "Hey, isn't he Joe's boy – you know, the carpenter's kid?" there's nothing in their tone of voice, at least as indicated in this story, to suggest that they are indignant at his behavior.

Quite the contrary. It sounds like they're proud of him; delighted with his success: "Here's one of our own, reading in the synagogue. And, my, how well he reads a story from the prophet! Jesus, yes, young Jesus, Joe and Mary's boy, come home for the winter break. It's so good to have him home, again. We've heard of all his accomplishments in Capernaum. We know him."

You and I wish we might have been there that Sabbath in Nazareth. Sure, we know the story by heart, but wouldn't it have been good to be there, still, and to hear him read? To see Jesus firsthand, without having to hear the story secondhand. Haven't you sometimes thought to yourself, "Oh, if I could only have been there – our choir sang about it, "I wish I coulda' been there!" – seen a miracle or two for myself, taken it all in.

We presume that believing would be easier if we were there. Instead, we have to base our faith on secondhand accounts, passed down through the ages. But if we could just get there, go back in time, and see it for ourselves, hear it with our own ears, believing would be a cinch, we think. No sweat.

You and I stand here on the other side of a great gap of history – something a German philosopher once called “the ugly, wide ditch” of history – 2,000 years and half a world away from Jesus and Jerusalem. And we wonder how something that happened that long ago and that far away could have significance for us today and, indeed, for all time. Would that we could just climb aboard a time machine and be there to see it for ourselves.

But . . . !

But, if time and proximity were the only problems, then why didn't the people of Jesus' home town – of Nazareth – why didn't they understand, too? Why didn't they see who he was? Why didn't they know him?

They didn't know him because they knew him!

Saturday morning, day before Easter, a few years ago. I'm in my office preparing my sermon. The phone rings; I answer.

“Just wondering what you're preaching on tomorrow?” the unfamiliar voice on the other end of the phone asks.

“Preaching on the Resurrection,” I say. “He is risen!”

“Good,” he says with some satisfaction. “Can’t be too careful these days, you know, what with all this liberal hogwash diluting the Gospel. You do preach the Gospel, don’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

“Glad to hear it. Course, me and my wife, we haven’t been to your church in a few years. Last time we was there, there was this preacher from up North – baldheaded fellow.”

“That would be me.”

“Oh. And you’re preaching again, tomorrow? Nobody special? I mean, no guest preacher, what with it being Easter and all?

“No sir; nobody special. Just me.”

We crave novelty, don’t we? Something special; different. When things are new, unfamiliar, strange, we react with excitement. “How odd!” we say, “how utterly fascinating! I’ve never heard it that way before. Let me go home and think on that one for awhile.” And we really like it when the preacher tells us

something that we can go home and think over while we sit down for Sunday dinner.

I used to go over to Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church for a Tuesday Bible study with about a dozen ministers from various denominations. And we would get to talking about, and discussing, how things went in our churches on Sunday. One of my colleagues got to bragging about a guest preacher he'd had at his church, someone with a reputation for being a great pulpiteer.

“You should've heard him,” my friend gushed. “His style, his illustrations, his presence in the pulpit; he's simply the best.”

Another of my minister friends jumped in about this time. “Joe,” he said, “you ought to hear me when I'm three hundred miles from here. I'm downright magnificent!”

Friends, Luke wants us to understand one thing in this story: The problem with Jesus is not between the old and the new, between the known and the unknown. The problem is between the people of God and their own memory. Between the known and the known.

I can go out of town and preach a revival service at another church, backed up by a large choir, and with a five minute introduction by a friend of mine who knows how to emphasize all the right stuff about my life, who tells the crowd how lucky they are to hear me preach – and I can't fail. But I stand up here on the third Sunday after Epiphany, in my own church, and it's, "Oh, it's him again. The bald guy from up North. No one special."

Jesus the hometown boy, Joe and Mary's son, spoke to Israel from its own Bible, its own past, its own traditions and prophets, something they already knew. "The Day of the Lord is here!" he said. "Amen!" they shouted. There was excitement stirring in the air, among the chosen people of God, in that little synagogue in Nazareth.

"Amen!" they shouted again. "We're all waiting for deliverance. The days of our mourning are over. The Lord is coming! At last he's coming to redeem his own!"

People lifted upon their crutches. Old men wept for joy. The oppressed raised their faces filled with hopeful expectation. “Amen!”

Then Jesus drops the bombshell. “When the Lord came earlier,” he says, “there were lots of poor hungry women in Israel, but God chose to help a foreigner instead, a widow from up North. You know that story.”

The congregation gets real quiet.

“And speaking of old, familiar stories,” Jesus continues, “y’all remember the one about how Elisha healed an army officer, a Syrian, rather than all those poor, deserving people in Israel.

The congregation grows even more silent.

When the Lord came to deliver us, Jesus says, remember that he came to meet human need regardless of national boundaries. It’s in the Bible, Jesus says. You know the story of Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha. And a chorus of “Amens!” suddenly goes flat. That’s because the sermon Jesus preaches suddenly becomes too familiar, too close for comfort.

Friends, let me warn you about reading the Bible, and taking it seriously. The closer you get to a story, the more familiar you become with it, the more you run the risk of not getting it. That's not because the Bible doesn't have the ability to move us closer to God – it does! Just that, we want to add our own layers of familiarity to it, so that in the end it sometimes becomes the opposite of what Jesus means to teach us.

“You remember those pagans from Nineveh,” Jesus asks them, once again. And they all said, “Sure, we know those rotten, no good so-and-so's from Nineveh. What about them?”

“Well, Jonah preached the word of God to them, and they listened and repented. How about the Queen of Sheba?”

“What bout the Queen of Sheba? Another pagan, another foreigner. What do say about her, Jesus?”

“Well, the Queen of Sheba went clear across the world just to hear Solomon preach. Yet, I'm standing here before you today, Jesus, who grew up before your very eyes, and I'm greater than

Jonah and Solomon put together. Don't you see it! Don't you get it?"

Many of you have said to me, at one time or another, "Bob, I want to get to know the Bible better." And I applaud you for that ambition. Far too many Christians these days haven't even got a clue how to read the Bible for effect. Because just as the saying is true that "a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing," it is even more true that "a little bit of biblical knowledge is a dangerous thing."

If you read the prophets in the Old Testament, they're famous not for predicting the future but for taking the old, familiar words of Scripture, which we all know so well, and turning them on us, sometimes against us. Jesus too: "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . ."

People will say to me, on the way out of church: "You stepped on my toes this morning." And I usually respond by saying, "that's because Jesus was stepping on my toes."

The people of Jesus' hometown church got real mad with him that day. So mad, in fact, that they wanted to kill him. That's because they didn't come to church to be reminded of the obvious, that God had blessed and cured even undeserving pagans in the past, in the Bible, and that he might do it again in their time. God once refused to play by their rules, Jesus said, and maybe God was getting set to do it again. And so they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. But he walked through that same crowd and went on his way, unharmed.