



Roanoke, Virginia

January 26, 2025

“A Prophet in His Hometown”

Luke 4:16-30

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Introduction:

It's a Sabbath day soon after Jesus's baptism and temptation in the wilderness. "Filled with the power of the Spirit," Jesus returns to his hometown, enters the synagogue he has likely attended since boyhood, and stands up (as is the custom) to read from the Prophets. He asks for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, unrolls it, finds the passage he wants, and reads aloud. By the time he's finished reading (the Gospel of Luke tells us), every eye in the synagogue is fixed on him.

Luke 4:16-30.¹⁶ When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ '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,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

²⁰And 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.



²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' ²³He 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."' ²⁴And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

I will always remember my first "official" sermon. Early on in seminary, my home church graciously invited me to preach. I arrived early that Sunday morning, full of nerves. I wore black high heels and my brand new black robe. I went through the order of worship with the pastors ahead of time, and I wondered silently to myself if I could pull this off. Was my sermon too long? Too short? Too boring? Would I be tall enough to see over the pulpit? I'm sure there were a lot of superficial questions running through my mind, but the *real* anxiety I felt came from the fear that I was about to preach in front of all these people who *really* knew me. The pews were filled with my former Sunday school teachers and youth advisors, parents of friends and former coaches. These were people who had seen me at my best and my worst. They knew who I really was inside. And who was *I* to think I could have a word from God for *them*?

I wonder if Jesus looked out at the friends and neighbors in the synagogue who'd known him his whole life long and wondered what *they* were thinking. These neighbors and friends, former teachers and mentors, they were his first audience. Was he nervous like I was nervous? Probably not, he was the Son of God – but what was that like for *them*? They had known Jesus as a boy, running laps around the synagogue after worship. They had known Jesus as a petulant teen, spending long hours in his Father's house, talking into the night with grownups who were very patient.

And for Jesus, this is more than a first sermon to his first congregation; this is a word about who he is and what he has come to do. Jesus unrolls the scroll and reads from the prophet Isaiah – words these faithful Jews would have heard a dozen if not a hundred times before.

Initially, all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from Jesus' mouth. They were proud of this young man they'd helped raise, because at first, what he says



sounds really good to them. But then Jesus goes on a little longer, and by v28, that same crowd was filled with rage. Within six verses they move from benign pride, “Isn’t that Joseph’s boy?” to fury. They grow so angry and they get up and drive him out of town, lead him to the cliff, and are prepared to hurl him over it. What on earth happened? What exactly did he say?

Basically, Jesus says to those who have been faithful and loyal to the Lord, that they should expect no preferential treatment and no special favors. He says that all that has been promised is being fulfilled, but they are not likely to be the very first recipients. In the five verses between hometown pride to thoughts of homicide, Jesus references Elijah and the widow at Zarephath, and Elisha and Naaman the Syrian. Generations ago, in the midst of a great famine, Elijah was sent not to relieve the needs of Israel, but rather to a gentile widow living in a Philistine city. And years after that, Elisha heals Naaman, a general in the Syrian army, Israel’s traditional enemy. Elisha heals an enemy’s skin before healing the lepers in Israel. In the first case, the prophet goes to a gentile woman. In the second, the gentile general comes to the prophet. But in both cases, a gentile is favored first. So, in referencing those stories, stories any faithful Jew would have known well, Jesus says the good news is not just for you, in fact it’s not even primarily for you. Because the good news is all about grace, and grace comes first not to those who might be the most deserving but to those who are the most in need. Because good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, the year of God’s favor, it must come first to those who are most vulnerable, and then to everyone else.

The people of Nazareth assumed privileges for themselves, they were the chosen ones. Jesus has just pointed out their error, and now has taken God’s favor to others, to outsiders. Jesus has pointed out their sin and squandered God’s gift on the foreigner. This is what has made them angry enough to want to kill him.

Thankfully, my very first sermon didn’t receive such negative press. It was far less memorable – and far less inspired.

To his neighbors, Jesus’ sermon was infuriating. To us, however, the language of Jesus’ first sermon shouldn’t be all that surprising. In fact, it should sound familiar. Just last month, we read and sang the words of his mother Mary when she was expecting her baby boy. Mary’s song, often called the Magnificat, echoes and reverberates with her Son’s first words. Her song acknowledges that what God has done, her Son will do as well. She connects the dots, between the God that she knows, and has always known, and the God that is orienting her future, through her own Son Jesus.



I wonder if Jesus learned something from his mother in those early years. Did she tell her Son stories? Did she sing him that same song she sang of God when Jesus was in her womb? Or when she rocked him to sleep?

It is fascinating to me that Jesus' neighbors in Nazareth heard the ancient, familiar words of Isaiah, and in a matter of a few verses, Jesus has blown their understanding of it completely out of the water. How often do *we* read scripture and not really listen to what it says? How often do we hear familiar stories and verses and overlook how revolutionary they actually are?

My parents and I joke (sometimes) that we consume very different news. But in today's world, that's not too surprising, is it? Our news sources move through filters – the filters of world politics, the filters of social media and algorithms, the filters of socio-economic location. But the Bible's not supposed to be that way, is it? These words are the same, aren't they? To quote Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord stands forever."

Then how can Jesus read a passage of scripture and interpret it so differently from his neighbors? How can they be so blind to what God has said God will do from the very beginning?

I have seen people misuse and misquote scripture more times than I can recall. It's a practice as old (probably) as the scripture itself, I'm afraid. The misuse of scripture gave moral and spiritual justification for dehumanizing other peoples, for stealing their lands, and for making it acceptable to enslave them. Ignorance and misunderstanding of scripture has led many to use it as a tool for abuse and subjugation of women and our LGBTQ family and neighbors. It's been disappointing and downright frightening to see the rhetoric of our day throw scripture around so carelessly to spread agendas of abuse and hate. I've seen pastors torn down for preaching good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and the year of God's favor to the underdog, the outsider, the vulnerable. And I heard a sermon just this week preach of mercy and humility, qualities Jesus had and commands us to uphold, met with rage and calls for the preacher's death.

I wonder what Jesus would say about that? How would he interpret a community's assumption of privilege for themselves and disdain for the outsider? How would Jesus confront such vitriol toward those God has sent him to welcome, love, and redeem?

John Calvin said that when it comes to faith, it ought to be a thing of both the head and the heart. When we approach scripture, we ought to do it with the intelligence, wisdom, and insight God has given us. And when we interpret scripture, it should be with the heart of Jesus Christ



himself who extended welcome, healed without question, loved with abandon, and calls us to do likewise.

When Jesus preached his inaugural sermon to his home congregation, he made people he loved *uncomfortable*. Perhaps we need to accept the possibility, the nudge of holy discomfort. As Debie Thomas asks, what if the release of the captives and the healing of the blind require that we step out of our prison cells and open our eyes?ⁱ It's one thing to look out on the horizon for the someday of God's kingdom, but it's another to live boldly in that kingdom now.

This is where we are called to be countercultural. This is where it gets tricky to be a Christian in the midst of a crowd that values privilege for some and not love and grace for all. Living, extending, testifying to that kingdom now – Jesus never said it would be easy; he never promised we would be comfortable. But he did say we'd never have to go alone. Jesus walks that road before us. Jesus calls us to follow.

Thanks be to God that Jesus comes not for the perfect but for the imperfect, not for the healthy but for the sick, not for the righteous but for the unrighteous, not for the strong but for the weak. That is to say, Jesus comes for us. May God give us the strength and energy to live into the dreams of Jesus' heart and promise. May we be brave enough not to be swept up in the crowd, but to follow the One whose way leads all the way to the cross and ultimately the empty tomb. Echoing that prophet who got Jesus in all that trouble at the start, Isaiah says, "This is the way; walk in it" (Isaiah 30:21).

ⁱ Debie Thomas, "Today" in Journey with Jesus, published January 16, 2022 <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/3299-today>.

