



North Shore
Congregational
Church

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Sometimes, They’re Right”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Luke 4: 14-30

Our reading, today, puts us very much at the outset of the ministry of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. Luke begins his narrative, of course, with much of that birth story that we know so well from the Advent and Christmas season. He starts with the annunciations of the births of both John and Jesus, proceeds right into the journey to Bethlehem, through the birth of Jesus, and then on to the shepherds and the angels. The rest of the second chapter of Luke looks towards Jesus’ ritual presentation at the temple as an infant and that brief story of Jesus running off in his adolescent years, only to be found in the temple a few days later. The third chapter, then, focuses on the prophetic preaching of John and the baptism of Jesus, which leads to the testing of Jesus in the wilderness for forty days. Our reading, for this morning, picks up right on the heels of that story of the testing of Jesus.

Now, as we’ll see in a bit, Jesus has actually begun to perform some miracles at this point in other areas, but Luke’s telling of the story really focuses on Jesus’s return to his hometown and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. And, as we heard in the passage that John read for us, for a short period, it’s going really well. *“He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.”* We hear in verse 15. Verse 22 continues on, *“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”* They begin to look towards one another in amazement, *‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son? Where is this coming from.’* We get this sense of this awe-filled reception of Jesus in his hometown. He’s teaching in the synagogues, he’s preaching to the people, everyone is lining up to hear what he has to say, and that is where we pick up our reading with verse 23.

He 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.’” 24 And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They 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. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (Luke 4: 23-30)

Take a moment to think about that. That got really ugly, really fast. A few moments ago, we were talking about the awe-inspired reception of Jesus. A few sentences later, they are driving him out of town in the hopes of throwing him off a cliff! Now, there's little doubt that there was more time involved in this course of events than the momentary manner in which it is presented by Luke, but the point is that there was this rapid and dramatic shift in how the public in Nazareth viewed Jesus, and it all seems to happen in these 8 verses of chapter 4.

So, what happened? *"He 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.'"* 24 *And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown."* Jesus goes on to start talking about Elijah and Elisha, and the limits to what they did in their own hometowns, but what's really going on here is that Jesus is telling them that he is not going to do what they think he is going to do. This is where we get into the stuff that's already happened elsewhere. Even though Luke starts the narrative of Jesus' ministry at this moment in Nazareth, he alludes to that which has already taken place in Capernaum. That's already out there. Some of this awe and wonder on the part of the people is that they've heard tell of what has been done elsewhere, and they are longing for the same to be done for them. And, what happens? Jesus announces that what they expect is not what is actually going to come to fruition. What happens is that Jesus tells them what they don't want to hear, and that's when everything breaks down!

As I looked at this passage for today, I couldn't help but find my mind wandering to the plethora of sporting events I've attended and the litany of moments in which I have been reminded of one of my great pet peeves of the world of competitive athletics. I love watching sports. I love going to games and enjoying the atmosphere and spirit of the event. What I don't love, however, is the predictable, seemingly unavoidable, and often delusional home-team fan response to any and every call made, or not made, by referee that in any way favors the other team.

- I'm sitting at a football game where the defensive back tackles the receiver fully to the ground before the ball even gets there. The ref calls pass interference, and the entire stadium erupts in unanimous complaint about the clearly biased official who is just trying to help the other team win.
- I'm sitting in a baseball stadium as the pitch crosses the plate, and the guy next to me starts bellowing about how the pitch called a ball was so clearly a strike. Now, we won't pay any attention to the fact that we're 300 feet away from the batter, up and off to the left, because none of that matters when eagle-eyes next to me clearly knows better than the umpire, three feet directly behind the plate, who stared at every move of that ball as it entered the catcher's mitt.

I could go on and on with these. Sharon has seen many a rolled eye over the years as I shake my head in those moments. And, yes, sometimes the refs get it wrong. Some systems help to correct that, others don't. Human error is real. But, this goes beyond that, and many of you know exactly what I'm talking about. Because you can't attend a major sporting event without immediately seeing that the vast majority of the people in those stands simply cannot as much as entertain the possibility that the official who made the call against their team might actually be right! Or, said another way, they simply aren't willing to hear that which they don't want to hear. And that, my friends, is exactly what happened in Nazareth.

When we read Luke 4, what we see is a story of a crowd that makes this mind-numbing shift from awe-inspired reverence to rage-driven malice – all because the message had turned to something that they didn't want to hear. It's a story we see again and again in the Bible.

- We spoke a few weeks ago of Jonah, who ended up thrown into the sea and swallowed by some massive fish, because he couldn't allow himself to hear what he didn't want to hear.
- Prophets like Jeremiah were rebuked and chased off because they were frequently sent by God to proclaim to people what they didn't want to hear.
- That rich young man ran off the moment that Jesus told him to sell everything and give it to the poor, because he just couldn't handle hearing that which he didn't want to hear.

There's a litany of these examples throughout the Bible, but the point is that there is this recurring narrative in which God is trying to speak to humanity and humanity cannot or will not hear anything that they do not want to hear.

I've often been asked, in the context of prayer, how we know when we are 'hearing' God. That's a complicated question to be sure, and not one to which there is a clean or consistent answer. One piece of my response to that question, however, is to point out that if everything we're hearing is reflecting everything we were already thinking, it's highly likely that it's not God who's doing the speaking there. If the voice of God is simply an echo of our preconceived notions, chances are we've taken the voice of God out of the equation altogether.

Whether we like it or not, sometimes, the refs are right. Whether we like it or not, sometimes, we need to hear what we don't want to hear. Whether we like or not, the ministry of Jesus was ubiquitously counter-cultural, brazenly counter-intuitive, and unabashedly contrary to the preconceived notions of those to whom he was speaking, and the choice of whether to stay or to run in that moment was often the definitive choice of how that person would experience the presence and love of God in their lives. Whether we like it or not, if we turn away, ignore, and argue every single time we encounter a voice that runs contrary to what we're already thinking, we are eliminating the voice of God from the equation altogether. Said another way... if we want to have any chance of growing in the directions that God is guiding us to grow, we have to be willing to hear that which we may not want to hear.

As I was preparing the worship elements for this service, I started looking at hymns, as I do each week, seeking the one that we could use around the sermon to tie in with the theme of the reflections. I was taken, when I did that, by the lyrics of the hymn we are about to sing. It's a tune we know well, but I don't think we've sung these particular lyrics. As we sing through them, I think you'll some pretty clear echoes of what I've been talk about for this last while. What you will also hear, however, is the recurrent ending phrase, "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His word.'

Some of you may recognize that phrase. Others may not. They are the words of Pastor John Robinson. Our ancestors in this Congregational Way of being a church – that Puritan band of believers who secretly gathered for worship in their homes in England – eventually left England and made their way through Amsterdam and onto the Leyden, Holland. After a decade in Holland, it was time to journey to the new world. In the summer of 1620, these 'Pilgrims,' as

they had been dubbed by Pastor Robinson, were about to board a ship in Holland that would take them back to England, at which point they would board the Speedwell and the Mayflower to head to the new world. As they embarked on that endeavor, Pastor Robinson offered a final message. In that message, he proclaimed to these Pilgrims that, 'God hath yet more light and truth yet to break forth from His holy word.'

They'd worshipped secretly under threat of persecution in England. They'd struggled in Amsterdam and then watched their community age and wither in Leyden. And now, this group of devoted men and women were about to board a ship to an unknown land – all in an effort to live more fully the faith that they were convinced they were called to live. And even to them – even in that moment of great faithfulness and fortitude – Pastor Robinson reminded them that God wasn't done yet, that God was still speaking, and that they had yet much to learn and understand. There was not among them, nor is there among us, one who knows all there is to know. There was not among them, nor is there among us, one who in our frail and feeble humanity could come close to articulating the truth of the almighty. There was not among them, nor is there among us, one who has all the answers or for whom all the answers held are correct.

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