

## The Synagogue in Nazareth

One thing that is evident when you look at this Gospel reading (Luke 4:21-30) is that the narrative really begins at v.14. As mentioned last week, it is as though the story was cut in half (last week vv.14-21) and we never got to know the reaction of the people in the synagogue. Fortunately, the story continues as Luke 4:21-30 is the Gospel reading for this Sunday (4<sup>th</sup> Ordinary, C). Many Lucan scholars hold that the two halves *together* are key and make clear the four major points in Luke's account:

- the announcement of Jesus ministry as the fulfillment of God's salvation-time,
- a statement about the content of Jesus' ministry based on the quotation from Isaiah,
- the foreshadowing of Jesus' final suffering and rejection,
- the foreshadowing of the movement of the gospel from Jew to Gentile. (*found in Stoffregen*)

Let us quickly review last week's gospel text:

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Gospel

<sup>14</sup> Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news of him spread throughout the whole region. <sup>15</sup> He taught in their synagogues and was praised by all. <sup>16</sup> He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read <sup>17</sup> and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: <sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup> and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." <sup>20</sup> Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. <sup>21</sup> He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

### 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Gospel (note that v.21 is repeated in order to give context!)

<sup>21</sup> He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup> And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" <sup>23</sup> He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb, 'Physician, cure yourself,' and say, 'Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'" <sup>24</sup> And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. <sup>25</sup> Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. <sup>26</sup> It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. <sup>27</sup> Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup> When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. <sup>29</sup> They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went away.

Remember that Luke uses geographical notices and reports of comings and goings to open and close sections of the narrative. Last week we witnessed the movement from the desert and the general surrounds of Galilee to his arrival in Nazareth and the events of that gospel. Very quickly from this week's gospel, Luke moves the scene to Capernaum (4:31-41) and we will see a pattern for Jesus' ministry:

- Jesus teaches (more often than preaches),
- In the synagogues (indicating that his first ministry is to the Jewish people)
- Reports about him spread because of his teaching, and
- He is glorified by all (and in later parts of Luke, also because of his miracles) - the only appropriate human response to God's disclosure of Jesus as the Savior

What Jesus does in Nazareth (4:16–30) and Capernaum (4:31–41) is typical of his work. “The rest of Luke 4 is carefully structured. Between the summary of Jesus’ return to Galilee in 4:14–15 and the summary of his departure to Judea in 4:44, Luke summarizes Jesus’ work in two villages: Nazareth (4:16–30) and Capernaum (4:31–41). In Nazareth, Jesus teaches in the synagogue; in Capernaum, while he is teaching, he casts out an unclean spirit and then heals Peter’s mother-in-law and various others. Together, these scenes portray the power of the Spirit in both word and deed, in Jesus’ teaching and in his healing. What he proclaimed in Nazareth, he began to do immediately thereafter in Capernaum.” [Culepper, 103]

### Commentary

**Today.** <sup>20</sup> *Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.* <sup>21</sup> *He said to them, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”* With the reading complete, Jesus takes the posture (sitting) of the teacher – as he was expected to do. All eyes are upon him, his reputation preceding, his choice of scripture provocative – *the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him*. Then simply and powerfully Jesus tells them that this great promise of God given in Isaiah, this promise of the long awaited Messiah has been fulfilled.

The first half of this text (*Luke 4:14-21*) presented us with a new future in the person of Jesus. Jesus had returned to his hometown and aroused expectations that the hoped for “day” of God’s new work in history was “today!” The unfolding of the hopes of centuries was at hand! The “days are coming” of the prophets was turning into “today,” according to Jesus.

The question that hangs heavily in the air is, “what now?” In some way, Jesus has “made his move” before the hometown crowd. He has proclaimed the “year of the Lord’s favor” (v. 19). The next move is up to the people. How will they respond? What will they do in light of this new future? Will they embrace it?

**The People Amazed.** <sup>22</sup> *And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?”*

The immediate response of the “hometown folks” to Jesus’ words was very positive. They were amazed and spoke well of him (v.22) – and perhaps with good reasons. One motivation not often discussed in the commentaries is a “siege mentality.” Imagine the ones at the synagogue are more a faithful remnant than a flourishing community. There were gentiles all around. Phoenicians lived to the west and north, Samaritans to the south, Greeks to the west. They were far away from the good influence of Jerusalem. They were surrounded by these pagan influences. It is hard to be a good, pious Jew in the city of Nazareth. It’s no wonder that Nathaniel said to Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth.” Nazareth was not a good place to hand on the faith. “But now Jesus is coming home and we have heard great things about him.” However, the turn at the end of v.22 is ambiguous. How are we to understand the question: “*Isn’t this the son of Joseph?*”

There are some scholars that take this phrase to be completely negative from the start. They understand all of these statements as part of the rejection motif and expressions of scorn and doubt that are a direct response to Jesus’ claim. Following this line of thought, the people of Nazareth rejected Jesus on the basis that he was only Joseph’s son. They were suspicious that someone who grew up in Nazareth, someone that they had watched grow up, could possibly do the things they had heard, and even more unlikely that he could bring the future they were expecting. This interpretation follows very closely with the way both Matthew (13:53-58) and Mark (6:1-6) characterize this event. Both place the people’s comments about Jesus being Joseph’s son in a very negative context, with the concluding observation that they took offense at him (Matt 13:57, Mk 6:3).

To be fair, the simple question “Is this not Joseph’s son?” may be read along a spectrum of approval or skepticism. Here are some other possibilities:

- Who would have thought that Joseph's boy would someday be God's prophet?
- Isn't this the son of Joseph (whom we all know)? Does he really expect that we are going to believe that he is a prophet?
- Maybe it is just Luke writing for irony: the townspeople think of Jesus as the son of Joseph when Luke has repeatedly established that he is the Son of God.

**Jesus in his native place.** There are another group of scholars who connect the people's question in v.22 with Jesus' words in v.23 and following. The presumption (and not a bad one) is that Jesus is aware of their expectations: "If Jesus has done these great things in other places, surely he will do even greater things here! He is a home boy and charity and good works begin at home, right?"

In the culture of Jesus' native place, home and family carry obligations, especially that of giving preference to one's own family and community. Jesus' words gives voice to their expectations: <sup>23</sup> *He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb, 'Physician, cure yourself,' and say, 'Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'"*

We have two challenges confronting us in understanding v.23. The first is that in our modern usage, this proverb is a retort directed at someone personally. But such an understanding does not explain the sharp shift in tone from the preceding verse. The second challenge is the English translation itself. In v.23 in the Greek there are no words "and say;" in other words what appears in all the major translations as two quotes, in the Greek, is one phrase. Perhaps a better understanding is that in Luke's use the proverb in the early part of v.23 is interpreted by the later part.

In addition, there are many scholars that offer "yourself" (v.23; singular) while more properly referring to Jesus personally, is not a reference to Jesus, but to the hometown of Nazareth. Jesus has understood the crowd's positive response; they are eager for him to begin to do the works of God's grace among them. They are ready to share in the benefits that might accrue to the prophet's hometown and miffed because he has already done wonderful things in other parts of Galilee and Capernaum. The result is that "Physician cure yourself" means bring the promises (vv:18-20) to your own people, and don't allow Capernaum to get the benefits that we should have.

If you think about it, this is not far removed from the later requests of two of the disciples that Jesus would give them special status. The people of Nazareth are willing to accept Jesus on their own terms, for what he can do for them, for the personal advantage that they can claim and enjoy because he is one of them. They respond as those who see the needs of the world through the lens of their own personal and local needs, who tend to reduce all the problems of the world to their own problems.

What people of Nazareth do not understand is that those "benefits" are not just for Nazareth and Capernaum, or even just all of Israel, but also for the Gentile nations – in other words, Isaiah's words were universal! Now you can begin to understand why Jesus shifts the tone and direction of the dialogue.

**Hometown Prophets.** <sup>24</sup> *And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.* This is certainly a familiar phrase, part of our modern lexicon, and has a variety of non-biblical uses. Peter Parker (aka "Spider-Man") can't catch a break in his own hometown (because of the editor/owner of the Daily Bugle, J. Jonah Jameson). Parker laments that a superhero is appreciated except in his own town. Biblically the proverb occurs four times in the Gospels, each time in a different form:

- Mark 6:4 "Prophets are not without honor [*atimos*], except in his native place [*patridi*], and among his own kin, and in his own house."
- Matthew 13:57 "A prophet is not without honor [*atimos*] except in this native place [*patridi*] and in his own house."
- Luke 4:24 "Truly [*amēn*] I tell you, no prophet is accepted [*dektos*] in his own native place [*patridi*]."

- John 4:44 “For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor [*timēn*] in his native place [*patridi*].”

The people had heard about a miracle worker, but Jesus takes to himself the identity of a prophet. The people know what that implied. Prophets did not have a reputation for bringing miracles and good things to the people of Israel. Most often, the prophets of Israel brought a message that confronted the people with their own failures to be God’s people. They called the people to accountability for their selfishness, for their faithlessness to God, for their lack of justice and mercy toward others, and for their sin.

In this Jesus joins a long line of prophets who were also not received in their own place: Jeremiah, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Elijah, and more. Jesus would not be the first prophet told to leave town because his message hit a little too close to home (Amos 7:12). He would not be the first prophet to risk death because he dared to tell the truth to people who did not want to hear the truth (Jer 37:12-38:6). He would not be the first prophet who had the integrity to refuse to cater to the whims of the people (Mic 3:5-8).

As before, as it will ever be, a true prophet is not going to be pleasing to his hometown, for a prophet is not governed by in-group loyalties. Jesus, who takes the role of prophet during his ministry, is governed by the purpose of God and the precedent of the OT prophets. Therefore, his ministry will focus not on the “faithful remnant” but on the excluded and unfaithful. Those who cannot accept this priority will find the prophet unacceptable.

**Past as Prologue.** <sup>25</sup> *Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land.* <sup>26</sup> *It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon.* <sup>27</sup> *Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.”*

The people of Nazareth had heard Jesus’ declaration of the fulfillment of God’s promises as a guarantee of God’s blessing on them, but Jesus affirmed a fulfillment that was not limited to Israel only—God would bless all the poor, all the captives. Neither was the fulfillment Jesus announced radically different from the work of the prophets. Israel’s Scriptures themselves bear witness to God’s blessing on Gentiles as well as Jews. Reminders of the mighty works of Elijah and Elisha follow naturally after the proverb about the prophet and the prophet’s home.

**Old Testament Stories.** Both Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-14) and Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-17), prophets in Israel, took God’s favor to non-Jews. That those two stories were in their own Scriptures and quite familiar perhaps accounts for the intensity of their hostility. Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced. Learning what we already know is often painfully difficult. All of us know what it is to be at war with ourselves, sometimes making casualties of those who are guilty of nothing but speaking the truth in love. For Luke, the tension that erupts here and will erupt again and again elsewhere is not between Jesus and Judaism or between synagogue and church; it is between Judaism and its own Scriptures.

The sense of privilege, of having some special status with Jesus quickly evaporated as it dawned on the people that they were going to get no special treatment. What should have been joy at the prospect of many being helped by Jesus turned to rage that he would so freely bestow “*the Lord’s favor*.” It is hard not to think of Jonah here, who would rather die than see God’s forgiveness and grace extended to the ruthless Assyrians in Nineveh. The people of Nazareth would rather kill Jesus than share him with others. Their response is its own condemnation.

They had not learned from their history the nature of the God whom they served, and so on this occasion were ready to kill his son. They should have known better. They should have remembered that they had been called to be gracious to others because God had been gracious to them (*e.g.*, Deut 15:12-15). They

should have remembered that the commission given to Abraham was to be a blessing to the world. They should have remembered that Isaiah had talked about this day as the time when Israel would be a light to the nations. They should have remembered why they were called into existence as God's people.

**Jesus Rejected.** <sup>28</sup> *When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury.* <sup>29</sup> *They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong.* <sup>30</sup> *But he passed through the midst of them and went away*

“The people of Nazareth then began to act on their rage. They drove Jesus out of town (cf. 23:26; Acts 7:58). The end of this scene is so condensed and elliptical that interpreters have often felt the need to fill in conjectural details. The site in question cannot be located with any certainty. Nor is it necessary to speculate about a miraculous deliverance or the force of Jesus' personality or presence. The intent of the crowd was hostile, but Luke emphasizes that Jesus was not stopped by them. The emphasis is on the last word, which in the Greek text is a verb that implies a continuous action: “He was going on” (ἐπορεύετο *eporeueto*). The verb (*poreuomai*) recurs frequently in Luke as the Gospel narrates the journeys that eventually lead Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross.” [Culpepper, 108]

As they were herding Jesus out of town to kill him, he slipped away. In Luke's Gospel, he never returned to Nazareth. The next passage, just beyond the ending of our reading for today, tells of Jesus returning to Capernaum and again doing great and wonderful things there, and the reports of him circulated throughout the country (4:37, 43-44). The contrast could not be greater. Those who should have known his mission and participated in it, those who knew him best, could see no further than their own wants and their own their own interests. They drove him out because he not only had dared to share the good news with others, he had brought them face to face with their own narrowness and closed future.

Over this story falls the shadow of the cross, for this will not be the last time that Jesus would take the good news to others who are not the “hometown folks.” And it will not be the last time by so doing that he would confront those who should know better with their own lack of vision and narrow exclusiveness. He will be rejected by his own again.

Luke is clearly foreshadowing the crucifixion here. But he also has in mind the larger mission of the church in the world. Jesus came to his own, yet they did not accept him (cf. John 1:11-12). But he came not just to his own, but to the whole world. It was precisely because he came to others that his own people did not accept him. They wanted him to themselves, or not at all.

The proclamation of Jesus' Good News began in Nazareth's synagogue. But they did not stop the story by rejecting Jesus there. It moved from there throughout Galilee to Jerusalem. And even though they rejected Jesus in Jerusalem, and even succeeded in killing him there, they did not stop the story. It would be played out in Acts, as the apostles and followers of Jesus also suffered rejection at the hands of those who should know better. But they did not stop the Good News. It simply moved on to Judea, to Samaria, and to the farthest reaches of the Earth (Acts 1:7). The Good News that Jesus read about and proclaimed that day in Nazareth, the mission that he defined, was carried out in spite of rejection.

**A Final Thought** – from Alan Culpepper, “*The Gospel of Luke*”

“This scene is more significant than its brevity might suggest. Its position at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, its emphasis on the Spirit and Scripture, and its depiction of themes that will dominate the rest of the Gospel all point to its paradigmatic character. Readers of the Gospel now understand that all Jesus does in the coming chapters occurs by the power of the Spirit. Jesus teaches, preaches, heals, and casts out demons. He moves among the poor, the outcast, the sick, and the blind. His actions fulfill the Scriptures, especially the Prophets, but even those who awaited the fulfillment of the Scriptures took offense at Jesus and eventually put him to death. This scene suggests that the basis for their hostility toward Jesus was a difference in the way they read the Scriptures. The people of Jesus' hometown read the Scriptures as

promises of God's exclusive covenant with them, a covenant that involved promises of deliverance from their oppressors. Jesus came announcing deliverance, but it was not a national deliverance but God's promise of liberation for all the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender, or race. When the radical inclusiveness of Jesus' announcement became clear to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, their commitment to their own community boundaries took precedence over their joy that God had sent a prophet among them. In the end, because they were not open to the prospect of others' sharing in the bounty of God's deliverance, they themselves were unable to receive it."

"Not only is this scene paradigmatic of Jesus' life and ministry, but it is also a reminder that God's grace is never subject to the limitations and boundaries of any nation, church, group, or race. Those who would exclude others thereby exclude themselves. Human beings may be instruments of God's grace for others, but we are never free to set limits on who may receive that grace. Throughout history, the gospel has always been more radically inclusive than any group, denomination, or church, so we continually struggle for a breadth of love and acceptance that more nearly approximates the breadth of God's love. The paradox of the gospel, therefore, is that the unlimited grace that it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it. Jesus could not do more for his hometown because they were not open to him. How much more might God be able to do with us if we were ready to transcend the boundaries of community and limits of love that we ourselves have erected?" [Culpepper, 108-9]

## Notes

**4:21 *Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing:*** this sermon inaugurates the time of fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Luke presents the ministry of Jesus as fulfilling Old Testament hopes and expectations (Luke 7:22); for Luke, even Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection are done in fulfillment of the scriptures (Luke 24:25-27, 44-46; Acts 3:18).

**today:** Today is an important word for Luke. It occurs 12 times in Luke and only 9 times in the other three gospels combined. It occurs in such familiar passages as: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you." "Today you will be with me in paradise." And twice in the Zacchaeus story: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay in your house today." And, "Today, salvation has come to this house." And in our text: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." For Luke today is a moment of radical change.

**4:23 *The things that we heard were done in Capernaum:*** Luke's source for this incident reveals an awareness of an earlier ministry of Jesus in Capernaum that Luke has not yet made use of because of his transposition of this Nazareth episode to the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry. It is possible that by use of the future tense you will quote me . . . , Jesus is being portrayed as a prophet.

**4:25-26** The references to Elijah and Elisha serve several purposes in this episode: they emphasize Luke's portrait of Jesus as a prophet like Elijah and Elisha; they help to explain why the initial admiration of the people turns to rejection; and they provide the scriptural justification for the future Christian mission to the Gentiles.

**4:26 *widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon:*** Like Naaman the Syrian in Luke 4:27, a non-Israelite becomes the object of the prophet's ministry. – thus Jesus is noting what has been done for Gentiles was not done for Israel. In the account of the widow of Zarephath, Elijah was sent to Gentile territory to stay with a widow and her son who were preparing to die due to effects of the extended drought. The miracles of the multiplication of oil and flour and the raising back to life of a widow's only son are the second and third accounts of acts of the Lord's power through Elijah; he has already caused the drought. Ahab's (the king) sin brought suffering for the people of Israel; Elijah's fidelity brings nourishment, as does the woman's faith. (1 Kings 17:1-16). Zarephath is located on the Lebanese coast (in ancient Phoenicia).

**4:27 Naaman the Syrian:** Commander-in-chief of the army of Aram-Damascus in the mid 9th century BCE who became a leper and who visited the prophet Elisha for healing (2 Kgs 5:1–27). The biblical story tells of a powerful foreign soldier who had achieved fame on the battlefield, and who was trusted by his king (2 Kgs 5:1). He was, however, a leper. A young Israelite slave girl, captured in one of the Syrian raids on Israel, began the process of healing by telling her mistress, Naaman's wife, that there was a prophet of great power in Israel. Initially, Naaman tried to gain access to the prophet Elisha through normal diplomatic channels (vv 4–7), but a serious misunderstanding by the Israelite king of the Syrian king's intentions almost started a war. Finally, the general found Elisha, but when told, through an intermediary, that all he had to do was bathe himself seven times in the Jordan he was furious (vv 8–12). His servant constrained him to obey the prophet and eventually he was healed (vv 13–14). Naaman's gratitude was great and he tried, unsuccessfully, to offer the prophet a gift. The gift was refused, but Naaman himself returned home with some earth from Israel as a symbol of a newfound faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel. When he, as the trusted aide to the king of Syria, entered the temple of the Syrian god, Rimmon, he would remember Yahweh and Israel (vv 15–19).

**4:28 filled with fury:** The other Lucan use of this term (*thymós*) occurs when another crowd reacts to a threat of its local prestige.

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