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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 24, 2010
Text: Luke 4:16–30

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It must have been a wonderful day in the synagogue of Nazareth. Jesus, one of the local boys, has been out making a name for Himself. That's what Luke records in 4:14–15, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all." Jesus is out teaching in the area synagogues and the reports coming back to Nazareth are outstanding. It appears that Jesus of Nazareth is the next rising star in Israel.

And now He's coming back home to Nazareth. That's what Luke 4:16, the first verse of our gospel reading for today, tells us. And He's coming back to participate in the weekly synagogue worship service. The town's all excited. I bet the attendance was higher that day. The local celebrity coming back home is always an occasion for celebration.

Luke tells that Jesus stood up to read the Scripture. The attendant gives Him the sacred scroll containing the writings of Isaiah the prophet. Jesus unrolls the scroll and finds the text He wants. There it is. Isaiah 61. Jesus reads the inspired text, rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and then sits down. You see in those days, the preacher sat down to preach while the listeners stood, the exact opposite of what we do nowadays.

In vs. 20, Luke says that after Jesus sat down, "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." The rumors and reports about Jesus have been extraordinary. He's been glorified by all, Luke says. And we find out in 4:23 that the good folks of Nazareth have heard about some miracles Jesus performed in Capernaum, that sea-side town about 30 or so miles northeast of Nazareth. All eyes were upon Jesus. Expectations were high!

And Jesus gives it to them, a bomb-shell that wouldn't soon be forgotten. Jesus says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (vs. 21). In order to understand better how shocking Jesus' statement is, we need to hear again what Jesus read from Isaiah. Listen closely (18–19):

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Isaiah is describing the Messiah, and only the Messiah. In the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus says those Messianic words apply to Him. He's the anointed of the Lord. He's the

great liberator and healer of mankind. He's God's preacher come to proclaim the Lord's favor.

Luke says, in vs. 22, the people "spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." Jesus was a great preacher. He spoke with power, authority, and elegance. It's one thing for the local favorite to come home with applause and fanfare. It's quite another to come home and say you're the long-anticipated Messiah who will save His people from bondage and oppression. These folks knew Jesus in a unique way. He's home-grown. You know the old sayings, "We've known you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper. I used to change your diapers and wipe your running noses."

There another old saying that's typically true, "Familiarity breeds contempt." The people of Nazareth couldn't deny that Jesus was a good preacher. But where does He get off claiming to be the Messiah? He's a good preacher but "Is not this Joseph's son?" (vs. 22). Or to put it differently, that's the Jesus we all know. He grew up here. He was a good boy, never caused a bit of trouble, but Joseph's son, the Messiah?! He's can't be serious.

The people of Nazareth faced one form of contempt bred from familiarity, we face another. None of us saw Jesus grow up, none of us went to school with Him. But most of us here have grown up in a church that talks and sings about, prays to, and adores Jesus of Nazareth. Have you ever been to a church service that didn't talk about Jesus in some way or another? If so, I bet it hasn't been very many times.

We're kind of used to hearing about Jesus. He's the Lord and Savior after all. But our temptation isn't to become so angry at Him that we want Him dead, like the people of Nazareth did (vs. 28-29), but we simply don't hear Him for what He's saying. We've heard and sang it all before. It's the same ol' gospel message.

God the Father sent Jesus to "proclaim good news to the poor." Is it still good news to us? Or are we too rich in our own eyes to think it worth our attention? The Father sent Jesus to "proclaim liberty to the captives." Have we come to peaceful terms with sin, death, and the devil so that we don't see that unholy things make us captives, thus separating us from God? The Father sent Jesus to proclaim the "recovering of sight to the blind." Are we too wise in our own sight to recognize that without being born again of water and Spirit, we are blind to the things of godly faith, hope, and love? The Father sent Jesus "to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Do we even feel oppression anymore? Or are we at peace with the things of sin, the world, and our own sinful flesh so that we no longer strive after godliness and purity? The Father sent Jesus "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Are we too rich, too self-sufficient to receive the loving grace of God shown in Jesus? Or do we simply say there are others who need God's mercy more than we do?

The anger and rejection Jesus faced in His own hometown of Nazareth is a sobering call to repentance and self-evaluation. These were good, pious people. And yet they couldn't hear and see that all their hopes and expectations were being fulfilled right before their eyes because they came in what was perceived to be an all-too familiar package.

But glorious good news is that in Jesus, the year of God's favor had come. Good news of forgiveness, liberty from the bondage of sin and doubt, healing from spiritual blindness, and entrance into God's kingdom were made available to all! To you good folks, nothing that Jesus read in Isaiah 61 has changed. Those words and promises are still true! God hasn't changed His mind concerning you or any of His redeemed people.

Jesus knows the struggles that the people of Nazareth are having; He knows the struggles that we are having. He quotes a proverbial saying, "Physician, heal yourself" (vs. 23) and then makes one of His own in vs. 24, "Truly, I say to you no prophet is acceptable in his hometown." Jesus then gives two OT examples of prophets being unacceptable to their own kindred: Elijah and Elisha.

Both prophets were known for their miracles and fiery preaching. Elijah was sent outside of the nation of Israel to Zarephath (vs. 25-26) during a famine to receive miraculously food and drink. Elisha didn't heal any lepers, although there were many in Israel in his day, except for the foreigner, Naaman from Syria (vs. 27). What's Jesus saying to his the good folks of Nazareth? Two things at least. One that is law oriented and is what created the unrighteous wrath of the people of Nazareth. The other gospel oriented. We'll take care of the Law statement first.

The reason these two OT prophets didn't perform miracles was that the people of God, Israel, had become too complacent with God, you might say that had become too familiar with Him. They thought they had a monopoly on the God-market. They were proud of their national identity as being the people of God. But they had lost the faith as the people of God.

Jesus is reminding them that God is no national deity. He will work in the lives of anyone who will hear and believe, even foreigners like widows in Zarephath and military commanders from Syria. The warning to the folks at Nazareth (and to us) is that God will work in people's lives. Will Jesus work in us, in those who think they know Him already, is a different question altogether. He will show His love when there are hungry souls.

The gospel message is that God is too big to be confined to one nation or people. And this should cause us to shout to the rafters. God's love shown in Christ is so large, so expansive, so magnanimous that it's for all people of all times and all places. That includes us here today. Today Isaiah 61 stands for fulfilled for you and me. This is the year of God's favor. In Christ, oppression is over. Liberty is given to all

The synagogue of Nazareth couldn't contain God's grace. Jerusalem couldn't hold all of God's grace and forgiveness. Israel couldn't hem in the powerful message that Jesus forgives and loves all. The world is filled with the glory of God in Christ.

And yes, that glory is heard and tasted in our assembly, heard through inspired, inscripturated words and tasted in consecrated bread and wine. The peace, glory, liberty, and good news of Jesus Christ be with you always.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.