

Luke 4:21-30 (NRSV)

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 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.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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

What we hear in today's Scripture lesson is the sound of the other shoe dropping. I've always liked that saying – waiting for the other shoe to drop. What it means is, waiting for the inevitable consequence of a previous action. We remember from last week's Gospel lesson, Jesus had returned to his home congregation and quoted to them from Isaiah. He said,

“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.”

And then he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And so now we are waiting for the other shoe to drop – what will Jesus do based on what he just said?

Well, the answer isn’t long in coming, but it isn’t what the people expected and to tell the truth, it isn’t what we expected either. Jesus picks a fight with them. The people have heard about the healings and miracles that he’s done at Capernaum and expect him to do the same for them now since this is his own home town. But he crosses them up. You know, he says, there were lots of widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, but the one that Elijah fed was a gentile living in Sidon. And you know, he goes on, there were lots of lepers in Israel in Elisha’s time, but the one Elisha healed was Naaman, a gentile General from Syria. You may think you have an inside track, says Jesus, but you don’t, not in the way you think.

Well, the people’s evaluation of this sermon is not completely positive – in fact, it is decidedly negative. They run him out of town, toward a cliff to give him a proper send-off, and how he escapes, we’ll never know because Luke doesn’t tell us. And it’s reasonable to ask how a sermon that started so positively has come to this.

I know that some people think that the crowd reacts negatively to Jesus overreaching himself. Who does he think he is? He’s nothing special, he’s just Joseph’s son. But, I don’t think that’s what is going on here.

No, I think the crowd is saying, in effect, “This is pretty cool. The small town boy has made good. Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” Well, no, it isn’t, no disrespect to Joseph. This is not Joseph’s son – this is *God’s* son. Joseph’s son, you might expect special favors from. Joseph’s son, you might expect would favor the home team, give his relatives and neighbors a special leg up. But God’s son? Not so much.

And I think that’s what upsets the crowd. Just like the disciples, later on, they think that being close to the Messiah should be worth

something, should give them special privileges. You see, the crowd thinks they know this Jesus and they know the world, and they know that being friends with the head guy, the Messiah, should be worth something. After all, knowing Caesar is worth something – knowing the high priest or the elders is worth something. Why wouldn't knowing the Messiah be worth something?

But that's the problem – they don't really know the Messiah because if they did, they would know that he doesn't intend to conform to the world but rather to have the world conform to him and to a new way of doing things. And so, the people of God get angry, murderously angry, and decide it would be easier to get rid of this Messiah they don't understand than to rethink the entire world that they think they do understand.

What they are angry about is that they can't get this Messiah to fit their agenda, to advance their program, to do what they want him to do. No, he has his own agenda, the Kingdom of God and it's an agenda very different from theirs. All of this would be interesting ancient history, except that we do the same things ourselves – we convince ourselves that since this is our Messiah he's here to do what we want.

So Pat Robertson can tell us that the reason for the suffering of the people of Haiti is that they made a pact with the devil a long time ago. You see, in Pat's world, the reason some people suffer is because God doesn't like them and this seems especially true for the people that Pat doesn't like either, so Pat has a ready explanation for the suffering of people he doesn't like.

But the Good News refuses to fit the logic of Pat Robertson's world or even the logic of our world. This is perhaps the most offensive part of this very offensive thing we call the Good News. We encounter it again and again – the laborers in the vineyard who work only a short time get paid the same as the ones who work all day. The young man, the prodigal, who asks for his inheritance and then wastes it, nonetheless comes home to a feast and a celebration.

In the strange world of the Kingdom of God, the good news comes not to the rich but to the poor, release comes not to the prosperous but to the prisoner, sight is given not to the worthy but to the blind, freedom goes not to the rulers but to the oppressed. The year of the Lord's favor is the Jubilee year, where debts are forgiven and slaves are freed and that's only really good news if you are in debt or enslaved.

And it's not so much that we don't know or understand this Messiah as that we don't want to. I think it was Mark Twain who said that it's not the parts of Scripture that I don't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I *do* understand. We want to Jesus to disapprove of people we disapprove of. But it seems like every time we try to draw a line that separates *us* from *them*, Jesus will wind up standing on the other side of the line, with them. This frustrating Jesus is always turning up where we least expect him, favoring people the world doesn't hold in high regard and asking us to believe him rather than the world.

Now, you might be inclined to say, whoa, wait a minute – let me sit this dance out while I try to figure out the steps and the music, but we can't really do that either. God comes to us the same way he came to Jeremiah and tells us to speak to the nations. And we say, "Oh, not me, Lord, I'm just a boy, I don't know what you want." But God says, "Don't give me that – you will go where I send you and say what I tell you, don't be afraid because I will deliver you."

I can't tell you how much this passage from Jeremiah struck home for me. I think I've mentioned that I don't sleep well on Saturday nights. The truth is, I'm usually terrified that the next morning I'm going to try to speak for God and I wonder, Oh Lord, what if I'm wrong, what if this is the opposite of what God wants us to know or to do, what if I don't know the Messiah any better than the people in his home congregation did.

And before you think, wow, it's a lucky thing you don't have my job, the truth is, every day of your life, God is calling you to speak in just the same way that he's calling Jeremiah or me or anyone

else. Because you are alive and you are making choices of what you will do, who you will value, how you will spend your money, how you will raise your children or influence your friends, how you will invest your time and your talents. It's no different, just a little less public and maybe not even that.

So, knowing that we don't completely know this Jesus who keeps surprising us, and knowing that how the world works is not a very good guide to what he wants, how do we live? First, we pray, with our hearts open, asking that *God's* will be done rather than our own. Second, we live humbly, always aware that we might be wrong, always ready to be corrected. Third, we live as people of the Book, open to new lessons from it, not always sure that we know everything already and aware that our intuitions are more likely to be wrong than right. Fourth, we live in hope that the God who calls us to speak will deliver us as he promised, and so we judge seldom and speak humbly and wait for the other shoe to drop.

For this savior who never ceases to love us and confound us but who nonetheless calls us to speak to the nations in his name, we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.