Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany (C), January 27, 2019

Luke 4:16-30 (esp. v. 28-30)

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In the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Word of God which engages us this morning is based on Luke 4: “When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away.”

## The offense of Elijah: God blesses the Gentiles

Elijah had had a rough go of it. He was on the run. He was fleeing from Ahab, King of Israel—king over God’s people. You see, the Lord had used Elijah to deliver a message to King Ahab: “I established you as king over my people, but you have brought nothing but wickedness and blasphemy and destruction. You have turned my people away from me, and so I am turning my hand against you: it will not rain again for years—until I say so. Your crops will wither, your animals will starve, and your people will die.”

As you can imagine, King Ahab was furious when Elijah presented this prophesy. He rejected the Lord’s Word and his prophet. So Elijah ran and hid. He came to a little town called Zarephath which was outside the realm of Israel—away from God’s people. There, the Lord continued to bless Elijah, and he prevented a widow and her son from starving to death. The Lord provided for all three of them by ensuring they never ran out of flour or oil. And so Elijah stayed with these foreigners for quite a while. The Lord’s favor was upon the Gentiles rather than his own people who had rejected him.

## The offense of Elisha: God blesses the Gentiles

Not long afterward, Elijah’s successor Elisha was given a wonderful opportunity to become internationally famous and powerful. The commander of the army of Syria—a leading world power—needed Elisha’s help. You see, Naaman was a mighty man of valor, but he was afflicted with leprosy. He heard that Elisha might be able to help, so he went down to Israel and found him.

But rather than accept Naaman’s kingly gifts and praise, Elisha simply sent his servant down to him with a message that Naaman should wash in the Jordan River seven times. Elisha was not in it for the money or the fame; he was a prophet who simply said and did what God told him to. And God told him to give healing to this Gentile, so he did.

And so through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, the Lord blessed foreigners rather than his own people. God’s people had rejected him, and so God turned his favor to people outside his covenant.

## The offense of Jesus: Jesus comes home

Many years later, the people of God would again reject him. So God would send another prophet to bless foreigners. Toward the beginning of his ministry, Jesus visits his hometown of Nazareth.

You know what it’s like to go away to college for a while and then come back home for a visit? You go to your home church, and people aren’t sure how to treat you. You’re clearly no longer just the kid they watched grow up, but they’re also not sure if they’re ready to consider you to be a full-fledged adult yet (and you’re not even sure yourself). So there’s this awkward conversation and you get the old pat on the back and “’attaboy.”

That’s kind of what it was like for Jesus. At his baptism, God the Father publicly, verbally declared Jesus to be his Son. The Holy Spirit visibly attested to the same. The crowd there witnessed that Jesus must be the long-expected Christ. This news about Jesus spreads, even as he goes into the desert to face off against Satan himself. Jesus is clearly doing manly and Christly things.

But then he visits home, and people aren’t sure if they’re ready to consider him to be a prophet. After all, they watched Jesus grow up. They still play cards with his parents. Some of his younger siblings are still living at home and trying to figure life out. Just how special could Jesus really be? The way Jesus talking, it’s like he’s seen a bit of the world now, and so he arrogantly thinks he knows everything. It’s like when you go away to college for a semester and then you come back home and tell your parents all the reasons why they’re wrong about everything.

This all comes to a head one Sabbath when they’re all at church. Jesus goes up front, as rabbis would, and he reads from the prophet Isaiah: “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.” Jesus then points two thumbs up at himself and says, “This Scripture is all about me,” and he does a mic drop.

You can just hear the people saying, “Who does this guy think he is?! Mary, Joe, get your kid under control! All these rumors we’ve been hearing about him must have gone to his head. Hey Jesus, if you say you’re the One whom God is finally going to send to come and fix everything, why don’t you go ahead a prove it? Do a little miracle for us. Do what you did in Capernaum.”

## The offense of Jesus: God blesses the Gentiles

I’ve been making light of Jesus’ actual wisdom and authority up to this point because that’s what the people in his hometown were doing: they thought Jesus was claiming far too much of himself. But from this point on, Jesus will not allow anyone to think him an arrogant fool. He had just *claimed* his authority, saying that the Scripture from Isaiah was about him; now Jesus would actually *demonstrate* his authority.

He dismisses their criticism, saying, “No prophet is acceptable in his hometown.” But by this, he doesn’t just mean that the people he grew up with fail to recognize him as an adult. No, they don’t recognize him as the Christ and the Son of God. But even beyond this, strangers and foreigners *do* recognize Jesus, while his own people reject him. God will again bless the Gentiles now that his own people are turning away from him.

So Jesus brings up this sore subject. “You know how back in the day our people rebelled against God, and so God turned and blessed the widow at Zarephath and Naaman—these foreigners—instead? Yeah, well I’m God, and I’m going to do it again. You reject me, just like you rejected Elijah and Elisha. And so just like my prophets of old I will take my Gospel and my restoration to the Gentiles. My epiphany will not only be among the people of God, but among all people.”

## Who *is* this guy?

All of this hinges on whether the things Jesus claims about himself are actually true. If Jesus is just some guy from Nazareth, then his people are right to reject his messianic claims. They’re even right to kill him—that’s what God said to do to false prophets!

And what makes this complicated is that Jesus *is*, in fact, a guy from Nazareth—truly and fully. Yes, he grew up there, beginning some 30 years prior. Yes, they know his real family. Yes, he *is* one of them.

But he is also, truly and fully, the eternal Son of the God, begotten before all worlds. He is the Christ, the One whom Isaiah was talking about. He is the one they’ve been waiting for. And he’s here now. This *is* the year of the Lord’s favor, in Jesus. He is the Deliverer and the Servant of the Lord. He is the prophet who far exceeds Elijah and Elisha. Jesus will not accept anyone who believes he is less than he actually is.

The people of his hometown do not accept his claim to be the Messiah, and so they try to kill him—just like God said to do to false prophets. But it is not yet Jesus’ time to be killed, and so escapes. He is in complete control of the situation, and so he walks right through the angry mob and leaves.

It is not yet Jesus’ time to be killed, but that time will come soon. Some three years later, God’s people will charge Jesus with the very same crime he’s accused of here. He will be sentenced to death for blasphemy for claiming to be the Christ, the Son of God. And there Jesus will die for their unbelief.

But Jesus actually *is* the Christ. He *is* the Son of God. And he will prove this when he rises from the dead on the third day. His Church will confess this throughout all generations until he returns to judge the living and the dead.

So “who is this guy?” He is Jesus, true God, true man, Savior of the world, King and Judge of the world.

## Who do *you* think you are?

But just who do *you* think you are? How dare you claim to speak authoritatively about such things? And moreover, how dare you claim to speak authoritatively about other people’s lives—you hypocrites, you?

Who are you? You are Christians. You are members of Christ’s Church. You are recipients of the true Word of God which has been handed down from generation to generation since the beginning of the world.

You are recipients of God’s Law. The warnings which God gave through his prophets are warnings for you, as well. God’s Law applies to you, and it condemns you. You *are* hypocrites, because you do not actually and consistently do what you claim is right. You are, in fact, the worst.

But you are also recipients of God’s Gospel. The promises which God announced through Isaiah and fulfilled in Jesus—these promises are yours, as well, dear Christians. “Good news to the poor” is good news for you debtors. The Lord will restore your good fortune. “Liberty to captives” is your freedom from sin, death, and the devil. You were enslaved, and your fate was in their hands, but God broke your chains when he condemned his Son in your place. “Recovery of sight to the blind” is for you the eyes of faith to see Jesus as the Lord and Savior, which he really is. “The year of the Lord’s favor” is your eternal inheritance in paradise. These gifts are yours, dear Christians, because you are Christ’s.

But not only are you *recipients* of God’s Law and Gospel, you also *bear* them. The Church has handed down the Truth for countless generations, and it will continue to do so until Christ returns. As you seek to proclaim the Word of God—to hold fast to the truth of the way things really are—you will share in Jesus’ cross. Jesus told the truth, and it literally got him killed. If they hated your Lord, they will hate you, too.

But take heart, dear Christians; Jesus has overcome the world. He overcame the crowds in Nazareth; he simply walked through the midst of the angry mob, untouched. He overcame the temptations of the devil himself in the wilderness; the devil is no longer your master. Jesus overcame death; it could not hold him, and so neither will it hold you forever. You live in the Lord’s favor, and no one can take that from you.

Your time to die will come, but you are God’s people. Though you are hated, though you are ridiculed, though you are ignored, though you are shut out of family and work, though you *die*, yet shall you live. So rise and go your way, and hold fast to the Truth. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.