

## ***Prophet on the Edge***

Luke 4:21-30

The Reverend Doctor Michael Newheart

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*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer.*

The title of today's sermon is "Prophet on the Edge." This title comes from the UCC calendar that staff received back in the fall. The calendar gives a title for a sermon on the Gospel reading for each Sunday. Sometimes I have used those, most times I have not. Today's Gospel reading is Luke 4:21-30. Although I am a lectionary preacher, I realize that sometimes the lectionary is kind of funny. Luke gives us one long story about Jesus being rejected in Nazareth. The lectionary cuts it in two. Amie dealt with the first part of it last Sunday, in which Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 and says that it has been fulfilled in their hearing, or literally, in their ears. It's my task today to finish up the story, in which it turns weird, ending in the Nazarenes attempting to throw Jesus off a cliff. So the "prophet on the edge" is Jesus on the edge of a cliff, to be pushed off by his fellow "synagogites." Where's the Word of God here?

Let's talk about the problems or questions or opportunities that arise in this passage. I remember back in 1987, when I was in missionary training, we were doing skits about situations that may come up on the mission field. In one skit, a missionary came up to his "mission administrator," played by my good friend Chris Ingram, and he said, "We have a problem here in the mission!" Chris said, "We don't have problems, we have opportunities!" I've often thought of Chris' quip, so let's explore the opportunities for growth and learning that this passage presents us.

The first thing that I want to note is that in six verses, the Nazarene crowd moves from amazement to rage. Jesus says the scripture is fulfilled, and Luke says, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words coming from his mouth" (v. 22a). Pastor Amie took her sermon title last week "Gracious Words" from this verse. But then in the mere space of six verses, Luke says, "All in the synagogue were filled with rage" (v. 28), so much so that they try to throw Jesus off a cliff. The Nazarenes are attempted murderers!

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus comes to Nazareth after he has been ministering awhile (Matt 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6). People there don't believe in him, and Jesus is incapable of doing miracles, but there is no act of violence.

Second, Jesus seems to provoke the crowd. Apparently using prophetic insight, Jesus tells them what they are thinking. He says that the crowd wants him to "cure himself" and they want him to do there in Nazareth what he's done in the neighboring town of Capernaum. The problem with that is that Jesus has not yet been in Capernaum. He goes from Nazareth to Capernaum, which the next passage in Luke makes clear.

Third, there are no such cliffs in Nazareth. And the town is not built on a hill. As you perhaps can see on the slide, Nazareth was built in a valley not on a hill. And finally, Luke says that Jesus passes "through the midst of them" (v. 30). How did he do that? One ancient manuscript that says that Jesus flew, but I don't think that that is Luke's intent here.

I hate to disappoint you, but I will not solve all these problems for you. I would like to say a few things, though, that seem important about the passage: First, Jesus speaks about Elijah and Elisha. Elijah (with a "j") was the Hebrew prophet who mentored Elisha (with an "sh"). In the slide, you see Elijah the mentor putting his mantle or cloak upon his disciple Elisha. Both ministered to Gentiles, according to Jesus. Elijah went to a Gentile woman and her son in Sidon, north of Israel, and Elisha cleansed a leper in Syria, northeast of Israel. It's not the last time these two prophets come up for Luke, for he depicts Jesus as a prophet like Elijah. Just like Elijah, Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17). And at the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah (9:28-36).

The second point that I want to make is that it's important to remember that Luke is the first volume of a two-volume work, Luke and Acts. There's a pattern in Acts: Paul goes first to the synagogue and preaches, the synagogues reject him, sometimes roughing him up, and then he goes to preach to the Gentiles (see Acts 13:44-52; 14:1-7, etc.). That pattern begins here with Jesus. He preaches in the synagogue, is rejected, and pledges that the gospel goes to the Gentiles.

Unfortunately, throughout Christian history, this passage has fueled anti-Semitism, that is, prejudice or violence against Jews, who are considered "Christ-killers." In reality, though, the Christ-killers were the Romans, the imperial power of the day. Prophets such as Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus represented a threat to the powers.

It seems that the Nazarenes are so amazed at first because they think that the blessings of Isaiah 61 are coming to them, but they become so enraged because Jesus is implying that those blessings are passing them by and going to the Gentiles, that is, non-Jews. As a blogger says, the folks in the synagogue here are "Nazareth-firsters."<sup>1</sup> But Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah say God's blessing to Israel would extend to the Gentiles. The Nazarenes here are not being good or even typical Jews.

So, what is the relevance of this passage? How does this passage speak to our situation as believers here in 21st century North America? I have placed my answer as the quotation on top of the bulletin: Scripture, like life, is delightfully complex. Let me say that again: Scripture, like life, is delightfully complex. Some people complain that the Bible is too difficult to understand, that it narrates the inexplicable, that it contains too much violence. But that's life, friends. Life is tough to understand, life presents us with the inexplicable, and life contains violence, including inner violence.

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<sup>1</sup> James Ernest, "Jesus Meets the Nazareth Firsters," *Verba Sparsa*," <https://verbasparsa.org/2021/01/01/jesus-meets-the-nazareth-firsters/>.

I wish it were different. I wish that life was easy to understand and navigate, that all of us were on easy street. I wish that we didn't experience rejection, opposition, rage, and violence. But we do. Life is fierce, as a colleague of mine used to say. So let us not be afraid to ask hard questions about the Bible, about life. God is not afraid of these questions. Indeed, God honors our questions. If we love the Bible and we love God and we love each other, then we will ask hard questions. When we come into the Meeting House, we will remove our hats but not our heads. Jesus, in quoting the Old Testament, says to love God with all your mind (Luke 10:27), and that is exactly what we do when we express doubts and ask questions. Poet, songwriter, singer Leonard Cohen said, "There is a crack, a crack in everything. / That's how the light gets in."<sup>2</sup>

That is why I say that scripture, like life, is delightfully complex, delightfully complex. We celebrate our questions, we honor all the incongruities, and we recognize all the problems that we see in scripture and in life. And we recognize all our emotions too: certainly joy and satisfaction, but also disappointment and despair and rage. How boring things would be if there were no questions, no difficulties, no problems, no disappointment, nothing that made us angry. As we ask the questions, point out the problems, and recognize our emotions, we realize that God is with us and that we have community—community that hopefully does not attempt to throw us off a cliff. (I'm not sure where cliffs are in Connecticut, anyway.) But we have a community that nurtures us and celebrates with us and cares for us and discusses our questions and concerns. Indeed, God is with us in this community and in the world, as we live in Spirit, as we search for truth.

Following this sermon, we will sing the hymn "My Life Flows On." This hymn is special for me because my friend Darrell Adams recorded it 40 years ago as the last cut on his album "Songs and Hymns." He sings it *a cappella*. The hymn expresses the confidence of the believer amid conflict: The chorus says, "No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging. / Since love is Lord over heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" Yes, love is Lord over pandemic and snowstorms, over anxiety and despair, over interims and bridges. As we are on the edge, and as we are on solid ground, let us cling to that rock that is Christ the Lord.

And all God's people said, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Cassie Werber, "'There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in': The story of Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem,'" <https://qz.com/835076/leonard-cohens-anthem-the-story-of-the-line-there-is-a-crack-in-everything-thats-how-the-light-gets-in/>