

“Expectation Confronts Reality”— Luke 4:14-30 1/27/19 @ Hope

I have never attempted to count the sermons I have preached nor the pulpits from which I have preached. After so many years it all tends to blur together. The exception is the few times that I have been invited to preach in my home congregation, where I grew up as a boy. These occasions stand out in my mind and I even remember some of the themes and texts. One can't avoid thinking that the audience is listening to you a little differently than other preachers, reflecting on what they might have known and remembered about you before you were a pastor. There is a bit of extra pressure because you surely want to make a good impression. We all long for affirmation and approval. You want to be the exception to the rule that Jesus stated, “ *No prophet is accepted in his home town.* ”

Obviously, **no such thoughts entered the mind of our Lord** when he opened the scroll of the prophet of Isaiah and began to preach to the crowded synagogue in Nazareth, the place where he had grown up as a boy. That he was in this position was no surprise. His reputation as a teacher and miracle worker had spread far and wide. They were eager to see him and hear him.

Evidently, things **started off well enough**. He is preaching from this passage from Isaiah which defines the *role of the Messiah as one who reaches out in mercy toward the poor, freedom for the prisoner, sight for the blind, care for the oppressed, the outcast*. They listen politely, even making positive comments, amazed at his gracious words. *Isn't this Joseph's son? Who would have expected this carpenter's son to be so articulate, so erudite?*

But **then he lowers the boom**. He begins to apply the text to the needs of the hearer. He infers that they are not really listening..that Isaiah's words are just going in one ear and out the other. He reminds them that **whenever the prophets of old challenged** the Israelites to extend mercy toward the poor, the prisoners, the outcast, the prophets were scorned and persecuted. He underscores the point that their **revered prophets ministered to Gentiles**. Elijah went to the **widow a Zaraphath**. This was Gentile country. Elishah healed **Naaman, the Syrian, another Gentile**. Well, now he had stopped preaching and started meddling. His audience was not appreciative of kind words being spoken about Gentiles. Their rabbis had taught that God created Gentiles so he would have somebody to send to hell, because Jews were the people chosen for heaven.

How I **wish Luke had given us more detail** about this sermon, because he really got under their skin. He clearly challenged their self-righteousness, their solemn piety, their pride in their Jewish heritage. And, of course, **what really enraged them** was his claim that he, the son of Joseph and Mary, was, in fact, the Messiah.

Well, **now they are listening**. Now they are angry. Now they want to kill him. Wow! I think to myself, he made an impression on his hometown alright! This was surely **no sample sermon** for the pulpit committee, after which he would negotiate for salary and benefits.

No, he **had a plan. He had a message. He had a destiny**. And he would work the plan, the plan of salvation, with or without the approval of narrow-minded, xenophobic, bigoted self-serving folks. **Never once in his ministry does he back away from his mission** as defined in the text from Isaiah. He would reach out in mercy toward the poor, the outcast, the sinner.

Even Gentiles. He would be the Suffering Servant who would finally submit to the hatred of the crowds and be killed. Not because the crowds were really in control, but because it was his plan, his destiny. And it was all **accomplished so that the poor, the outcast, the sinner. (incidentally, that's you.. that's me)** so we might receive forgiveness and new life...bought with a price, washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. It is a powerful story.

And it really gets my mind going. **What are we supposed to do with all this?** What is the lesson here for 21st century Christians....people who have heard of Jesus and his love and forgiveness so many times? Do we come to simply hear the preacher tell it again? Hopefully, with a few entertaining illustrations or anecdotes? Are we more concerned with the style of the message than its content? Does most of this just go in one ear and out the other? Maybe God has to get under our skin to save our skin.

The **most significant challenge that Jesus** faced with his Jewish audience was that they had defined **the role of the Messiah in purely nationalistic, ethnic terms.** Their expectation was that Messiah was for them, and them alone! His purpose was to rescue and restore the glory of the Israelite people, to throw off the hated bondage of the Romans. The power of Rome, their control over every facet their lives, was a bitter, daily experience. The messianic kingdom would enable them to walk tall and proud, as when King David ruled. They essentially **designed a God, a messiah, to meet their perceived needs. This was the expectation. There was quite a collision when they confronted the reality.**

So I asked myself, **what kind of a Messiah would we design? What are the expectations of God in our culture?**

This is not much of a mystery. A **young woman** came to her pastor with her life in turmoil. She said that it all started four years before when she was dating a young man and became pregnant. She said, *I was devastated. I asked God, " why did you let this happen to me?"* Indeed, shame on you, God!

Or when **the professional boxer** slammed his opponent with a blow that caused a massive cerebral hemorrhage, causing his death. At the press conference, he said, *" Sometimes I wonder why God does the things he does."* How unkind of God.

Or the one that was brought to mind recently in a TV show recounting memorable crimes...do you remember the **name Susan Smith?** The young mother who locked her two toddler sons in her car and pushed it into a S.C. lake... and then blamed a mythical African-American car-jacker for the horrible deed. Later, she wrote in her confession, *" I dropped to my lowest point when I allowed my children to go down that ramp. I ran screaming after them.."**Oh no, oh no, oh God, why did you let this happen?"*

As I said, it isn't much a mystery. **We would design a sweet, sentimental Jesus who would somehow protect us from experiencing the consequences of our misdeeds.** God would be a doddering old Sugar Daddy who would stand at heaven's gate and say, *" I know you guys tried real hard..well, some of you tried real hard,... but after all, you are human, so , what the heck, everybody just come on in! "*

No, no! In this life, the **reality is you pay a price for your misdeeds. Sin has consequences, and we dare never forget it. Sometimes we can easily see the connection between sin and consequence. Sometimes not. Sometimes it is tragic mystery. But we live in a sin-cursed**

world. As someone has said, *“You can’t work in a slaughterhouse without getting bloody.”* And we dare never forget that there would **be eternal consequences** except that our Lord knew the plan and worked the plan from start to finish. The plan was costly. Your sins and mine, the sins of the whole world, nailed Him to a tree. That’s the reality. It was bloody. It was painful. It was undeserved. It was an act of love, the ultimate sign of grace and mercy. Thanks be to God.

I also think to myself, why did these **folks in Nazareth find it so difficult to accept a Messiah who reached out to the poor, the outcast?** And especially why did they have such a visceral hatred of foreigners? Why did they take such pride in being children of Abraham, thinking of themselves as on the inside track, with so little concern for the leper, the prostitute, the flagrant sinner? What **sort of smug self-centeredness** shaped this perspective?

And **what about us? We talk about a Gospel for the whole world**, teaching our children to sing, *be they red or yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight.* But are **we really quite content** with a church that caters to our own emotional needs? A place to come sing some familiar hymns, to escape the fears and challenges of the wicked, old world for an hour or so? And provides us some really nice people to socialize with? As for the poor, the outcast, the prisoner, those stumbling their way through life without a clue regarding the cost or the benefit of God’s love for them, stumbling and struggling like sheep without a shepherd.. Well, we hope that God will be kind to them. Right?

As I said, this text really gets my mind going...does he have to get under our skin, to save our skin?

I thank God that we have a church here at Hope Lutheran that really does, in so many ways, reach beyond ourselves and our own needs. But we must always **remind ourselves that this is our mission.** We come here to worship and praise our gracious God, to give thanks for a Savior who covers our sins with His sacrifice, but also and especially to reach out with our time, talent and resources to a hurting world outside our walls. **This is the mission, the expectation. May it also be our reality. Amen.**