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## The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

### January 30, 2022

#### Reception Uncovered

Rejection is not the exception but the rule

It's easy to assume that the Word of God ought to be welcomed whenever it is preached. It's easy to be surprised when the Word is met with apathy or rejection. It's easy to conclude that when the Word of God offends human minds and hearts (including ours) something has gone very wrong. In the Gospel for today, Jesus helps us to see that rejection is not the exception but the rule. This truth reminds us that the message of Jesus isn't meant to gain popularity but to bring forgiveness and relief.

#### Sermon

#### Luke 4:16-30

The Rabbi Said What?

**Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."**

**All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' " "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."**

**All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.**

I wonder what it was like being at that synagogue we heard about in the Gospel. It was the Sabbath, and Jesus was in his home congregation; he knew everybody there and everybody there knew him. The folks in Nazareth had watched Jesus grow up. He was a nice boy, maybe a little too nice, but everyone liked him. He was always willing to talk about religion even in his carpenter shop, and people respected what he said. Nobody was surprised when he took his turn to read one of the Scripture readings that Sabbath Day. The priests functioned at the temple in Jerusalem, but the laymen were the leaders at the synagogue. The best and the brightest became the teachers, the rabbis.

The word on the Nazareth street was that Jesus was one of the best and the brightest—probably a potential rabbi. People were starting to listen to what he had to say. And then there were the miracles. The Nazareth people had heard about the wine thing at that wedding in Cana, but now some people were saying that Jesus had gone back to Cana and

healed a boy who was almost dead. So there must have been a buzz in the air on that spring day when Jesus stood up in the synagogue to read the Scriptures. Were the older men proud? Were the younger men jealous? Were the women straining to get a look?

A lot of time has passed since that Sabbath Day in Nazareth, but people still look forward to listening to Jesus. I mean, we certainly do. We wouldn't be in church if we weren't. A lot of people go to church and they look forward to listening to Jesus, too. Even people who don't go to church like having Christian neighbors and Christian employees and they don't even mind hearing Christians talk about Jesus now and then. But here's the sad reality. When people hear what Jesus is really saying, when they actually come to grips with his message—well, not so good.

That's what happened in Nazareth. Jesus read the Scriptures and he preached a sermon. And when he said Amen there were smiles and back slaps all around; fine sermon, young man. But deep inside every mind and every heart was the same compelling and confounding question: **The Rabbi Said What!?**

1. Jesus had returned to Galilee after celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem and he was preaching and teaching wherever he went. Eventually it came time for local boy to make good. Luke tells the story: **He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.** Well, the Joseph family never missed, of course. There was an order of service in the synagogue just like here. **He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written—**The reading was from Isaiah chapter 61. Maybe it was the selected reading for that day; probably it was a passage Jesus chose to read. Every worshiper in the synagogue knew this passage. It was part of a whole set of passages Isaiah wrote about the Messiah who was coming. These worshipers also knew that the speaker in Isaiah 61 was Messiah himself, speaking before he was born. So Jesus read: **The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.**

When Isaiah wrote these words, his eyes could see the homecoming of the nation of Israel. Messiah was coming to restore the poor and release the prisoners who were oppressed by their captors in Babylon. But Isaiah saw more, and what he saw is what we see. Isaiah's poor aren't broke, they're broken, they're disabled because of their sins and they can't put themselves back together. Isaiah's prisoners are chained by Satan who owns them and refuses to let them go. Isaiah's blind people can't see a way forward, they live in never-ending darkness and doom. Isaiah's oppressed carry the weight of their sins on their back every day and can't get out from under them. There's no future for these people. This is what they live with and this is how they'll die. These people Isaiah saw? We're those people. We're the poor and the prisoners and the blind and the oppressed and the hopeless. The Bible uses other words and says it in different pictures, but it all comes out the same. When it comes to our relationship with God, we are damned if we do and damned if we don't.

And that's exactly why we love listening to Jesus. What Isaiah prophesied we've seen happen. God sent Jesus to put us back together again. Jesus healed what was broken in us and he cured what was diseased. He offered his life and his death to God and he paid the price to get us out of Satan's prison. He opened our eyes so we could see his love and he lifted the guilt off our backs. We were hopeless but he presents to us a **time of favor and a day of salvation.** Long and short, Jesus took away the sin we were born with and he forgives the sins we live with and he gives us peace with God, he gives us joy in living, and he gives us hope for the future. And that's why we love to listen to Jesus! Because that's what Jesus says.

2. He said that in Nazareth, too, when he read from the prophet Isaiah. **Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."** It was like a bombshell landed in the middle of the synagogue. They couldn't deny that he was a good preacher: **All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.** But the doubts came quickly: **Isn't this Joseph's son?** Is Joseph's son claiming to be Messiah? If they didn't say it, they were thinking it: **The rabbi said what?**

Of course, Jesus saw through it. The trouble was, they weren't listening to what Jesus was telling them. The people in Nazareth were like people all over Galilee and Judea, too; they never got past the miracles and they never got past the politics. They wanted a healer and a hero, not a suffering servant or a savior. **Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"** But there was more. God's plan to save always reached beyond Israel. God had the world in mind when he promised to send the Messiah. Figure it out, Jesus said; check out the evidence. **I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.** This was worse than a bombshell; this was a nuclear attack. It was bad enough that Joseph's son claimed to be Messiah. Now he was a turncoat and a traitor! Now they knew what the rabbi was saying. **All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.**

There aren't many cliffs in Mequon unless you get close to the lake. And Jesus isn't here to throw, anyway. But when people hear what Jesus actually says about his work, they can get just as upset and just as angry. People kind of like a nice Jesus. They'll go to churches that preach a nice Jesus. They'll enjoy being friends with neighbors who talk about a nice Jesus. But there's more to Jesus than a smiling shepherd with a well-trimmed beard, more than a teacher who talks about love, more than a model for a good life. What Jesus really says is that he suffered and bled and died for raunchy and wretched people who were stuck and snared by sin. If Jesus is right, then people are wrong. If Jesus is good, then people are bad. If Jesus saves, then people are damned. And people hear what Jesus says and people say: **Jesus says what?!** And they turn and walk away. They reject the good news about Jesus because they reject the bad news about themselves. In Nazareth, in Mequon, in Thiensville--wherever Jesus speaks, **rejection is not the exception but the rule.**

We need to know about Nazareth. Nazareth helps us understand why outreach efforts in Mequon seem to fail and why people we know can be nasty to Christians some times. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. If people you know and love aren't thirsty, they won't drink the water of life. It breaks your heart, but it's reality and not just in Wisconsin. Here's something else. Nazareth helps us understand ourselves. Is Jesus more to us than a familiar face we've known all our lives? Is his name more to us than a name we speak when we sit down for supper? Is church more to us than a sermon that keeps us awake? Is the Bible more to us than a book filled with the names of our ancestors? Are we hearing what Jesus actually says about what we are? Are we listening to what Jesus actually says about what he does?

At the edge of the cliff **Jesus walked through the crowd and went on his way.** With that same kind of power Jesus sees to it that we are not surprised when we hear what he says. We confess what we are and we believe what he did. And that's why we keep sharing what the rabbi said in Nazareth and what Jesus says in the Bible. Rejection may be the rule, but the Spirit can break the rule. He did that with us and he will do it for others. Amen.