

“Foiled Expectations” – Luke 4:21-28 – February 17, 2019

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Jesus began his ministry by preaching and teaching in local synagogues throughout the region of Galilee. People who heard him were intrigued and impressed by his teaching and they talked about him and his message favorably. Today’s story in Luke’s gospel continues what we began last week – Jesus coming to his own hometown to teach. His message was anticipated with great enthusiasm

Jesus had grown up in Nazareth, and among relatives and friends, he would have felt very much at home in the local synagogue. Last time they saw him, he left town to be baptized by the man John the Baptist out at the Jordan River. Since then he had been out in the desert for over a month praying and then traveling the countryside with a message from God that got people excited. So the hometown folks were very much interested in what he had to say to them.

And like we learned last week, Jesus stood up among them and took the scroll that was handed to him. He unrolled it. It was a scroll of the writings of the prophet Isaiah. He found the passage for which he was looking and began to read. “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.”

After reading this, Jesus rolled the scroll back up, handed it to the attendant and then sat down. After reading the scripture, this was the time for the sermon, for Jesus to make some profound remarks about what he had just read. This was the time for the teaching. And they waited, expectantly, to hear what he had to say. And this is what he said to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Now at first, their reaction was positive. It was as if the people did not hear what he said. Or they heard – but only the words, not the meaning. They commented on the way he spoke – a fine orator he was. They remarked on his family of origin. Is not this Joseph’s son? And Mary’s little boy, all grown up? Look at how well he turned out?

Now this is what they missed from Jesus’ concise response to the scripture passage he read from Isaiah. In effect he was telling the people that this message from the prophet Isaiah points directly to himself – that this is what he means to accomplish. The overturning of the status quo. His ministry will be focused on bringing about justice from oppression and championing equality and basic rights for all people. This is his purpose, his motivation, his calling. This is the summary of his message – bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor, which had to do with distribution of wealth. This simple pronouncement would become the basis of everything he

would do throughout his ministry – living it out each and every day, in every interaction he had with other people.

And like so much of the rest of the story, the hometown folks missed the point. They didn't hear the message of the gospel. They heard the words, but missed the meaning. This scene will repeat throughout Jesus' ministry, as many others will fail to hear that message as well. Or if they do hear it, it comes as a threat to their position in life. The good news that Jesus brings is not good news for those who have the power and dominion in the world, or for those who have an abundance while others go without, or for those who choose to live in darkness. The light of the gospel is an upheaval of the status quo, an affront to worldly ways of life - success and status and power and wealth.

Well, if Jesus' neighbors missed that particular point, they certainly heard what came next. Because next he spoke about prophets not being accepted in their hometowns. He gave an example of Elisha and Elija – going to the aid of a gentile widow during the time of a nationwide famine. Rather than caring for the local people in need, Elisha and Elija were specifically sent to aid a poor women in Sidon. And perhaps we lack the full context to know why the people got so upset – enraged to the point of wanting to kill him. In effect, this is the message he gave to them – and they didn't like it – they would not be receiving the preferential treatment from him that they thought they deserved – as their hometown hero. And furthermore, this message of the gospel isn't just for Israel. This good news extends to the Gentiles. And friends, that was tantamount to blasphemy. Oh, they didn't like that at all. And next we see them driving him out of the synagogue in order to hurl him off a cliff. Yet he slips away from them.

Again, Luke is showing us the full gospel story in miniature – Jesus will continue his ministry, and he will face opposition from those in religious authority and political power. His message of good news will so anger the establishment, they will plot for his death. Foreshadowing of what is to come.

I think the message we can take from this passage today, is that Jesus is truly focused on God's path for his life. His neighbors in Nazareth thought that by association, they should reap some of the benefits of his fame. It's like when you drive into a small community and notice a sign out by the road – Jesus grew up here! Then there are the folks in Bethlehem, "Oh, yeah, well he was BORN here!" We want to ride on the coattails of our famous friends.

But Jesus will have none of that. Showing favoritism, participating in elitism, flies in the face of the gospel. I wonder if we in the church are aware of similar tendencies. The disciples of Jesus certainly struggled with it. Jesus caught James and John arguing about which of them would have a higher status in God's Kingdom. Do we ever try to claim Jesus as our own or

imagine that we hold a higher place in God's realm? Do we ever try to compare ourselves with others? Thinking of ourselves as better or as more deserving than certain others?

The folks in Nazareth, not only wanted special status, but they also were unwilling to share God's favor with Gentiles. They maybe would have been okay, had Jesus explained that this good news for the poor and the captive and the blind was only for those who were Jews. They could have worked with that. But to say that God's favor, God's mercy and love, extends outside of the covenant? That was unacceptable.

I wonder if as the church, we ever try to limit who can receive God's blessings? Do prejudices or stereotypes ever keep us from sharing the love of God in Jesus Christ with certain groups of people? Are there groups of people who make us uncomfortable? Perhaps those are the people we need to seek out and learn from them. The ones with whom we need to build relationships. Or at least try to look at the world through their perspectives.

Do we ever hold some types of people as being beyond redemption? Do we label some people as hopeless? Perhaps we cling to the mindset that if you dig your own hole, you should lie in it. But we forget that we do not know or understand all the factors in someone's life or history that effect how and why they act the way they do. We have not experienced the world in the same way that they have.

Do we try force Jesus to go where we want him to go? The disciples did that – Oh no, Jesus, keep those kids away. You don't want to be stuck tending to a bunch of toddlers. Yet Jesus, continued to bless all the children who came to him. Oh no, Jesus, you shouldn't be talking to that woman at the well – she's a Samaritan, and probably a little loose in her morals. Yet, Jesus continued to talk to women and treat them with equality and respect. And he continued to dine with tax collectors. And he healed the children of Roman Centurions. And he wept for the spiritual blindness of Jerusalem. And he healed a soldier who was about to arrest him. And he turned to the thief on the cross next to him, and gave him the glorious hope of God's future.

May we learn from the examples Jesus has given us and push ourselves to follow his examples.