

Called to Proclaim: Jesus in Nazareth

January 3, 2021

Luke 4: 14-22

I'm somewhat surprised that we jump directly from John the Baptist to this passage from *Luke*. We skipped over the story in *Luke* of Jesus in the Temple when he was twelve years old. That was a scripture we read July 12, just before visiting Jesus's visit to Nazareth in Mark on July 19. We also skipped past Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River by John, and the Temptations in the wilderness, all reported in the gospels before Jesus comes to Nazareth. The Temptations were a particularly important point in Jesus's calling. In Baptism by John, Jesus accepted his calling as Messiah. But what kind of Messiah would he be? He was given choices. That these were false choices that would have led him astray is seen by who they came from. Jesus chose not to be the kind of Messiah that would have won him quick popularity and political power. He understood his calling, instead, as described in the book of *Isaiah*, specifically, "Isaiah of the Exile."

In *Luke*, Jesus's visit to Nazareth almost immediately follows in the text after the Temptations. I say "almost," because, in between, are the following verses:

Luke 4: 14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

This tells us that Jesus did not go immediately to Nazareth. He taught in synagogues (more than one) before doing so. There was time for word about him to spread around. In *Mark*, we have Jesus calling disciples, touring Galilee, healing, teaching, and coming into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees, all before visiting Nazareth in Chapter 6. Indeed, he even comes in to conflict with his family (*Mark* 3:31-35) before returning to Nazareth in Chapter 6. In *Matthew* we also have the Sermon on the Mount (Chapters 5-7) and Jesus does not visit Nazareth until the end of Chapter 13. Now, we cannot expect the order in which stories are given in these gospels to be chronologically consecutive. The first gospel, *Mark*, was derived largely from what Peter spoke in the presence of Mark. Tradition says that, while Mark wrote as accurately as he was able, the order in which stories are told cannot be taken as in the correct order. Luke and Matthew, writing still later, perhaps by as much as 20 years, are even further removed from direct witness. But even in *Luke* we seem to have hints that Jesus took a while before returning to Nazareth well after he had visited elsewhere in Galilee.

By the time Jesus gets to Nazareth, then, the people of his home town have heard great things about his teaching, his healing. They hear reports that he is the Messiah, though he does not publicly claim that title for himself. Likely there were people of Nazareth that may have heard him already when he was teaching elsewhere. When word got about that he was coming to his home town of Nazareth, can you imagine the excitement? There would have been pride, curiosity, and expectations.

All of that was conditioned by the fact that these people knew him. Nazareth was not big. In a small town, everybody knows everybody, and all the dirt in everybody's closet. This is not quite so true in our day. As I was growing up, I was shielded by a degree of anonymity. My family was from elsewhere. Almost nobody in my school knew of my family at all, and what adults might have known didn't have effects at the childhood level. I went elsewhere during my college years, then was in the Navy, unknown to anybody before I met them, and then in graduate school and in industry, again, unknown to anybody beforehand. That was true yet again when Cindy and I moved here. In contrast, Cindy grew up in a small town where everybody knew everybody else. People who seemed to think they were superior would talk about, as someone would know what sort of folks their parents or grandparents were, or how they acted when they were young. That would take some of the shine off of their presumption. That's more like what it was for Jesus coming back to Nazareth. That may be why he waited so long to do so.

In the last verse (v. 22) of the scripture passage in our lesson book, we read, **“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”** The lesson book omits the rest of that verse, **“They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”** That is the beginnings of a negative reaction. In Mark (the earliest report of this event) we read here,

Mark 6:2 On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are done by his hands! 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”

The problem to the home town crowd was that the authoritative teaching was inconsistent with who they “knew” Jesus to be – just another local boy of ordinary background. Where did he get all this? Why does he think he is anybody special?

Ultimately things culminate in his rejection in Nazareth. In *Luke*, that culminates in an attempt to kill him. There is much that can be said about the prophet in his own town phenomenon. Some of that is in the July 19 lesson that was sent out (or can be found on my web site at www.Jbgilmer.com/Messages/Messages.htm towards the bottom of the page). We'll set that aside to focus on the scripture Jesus reads.

“Worship in a Palestinian synagogue consisted of a recitation of the Shema, a prayer, a fixed lexicon from the Law (parashah), a free lexicon from the Prophets (haphtarah), an explanation or application of one or both of the scriptural passages, and a blessing by a priest or a prayer by a layman. The scripture was read in Hebrew, but a translator turned it, verse by verse, into Aramaic. There was no official “minister.” An invitation to read and to preach could be extended by the ruling elders to any competent member of the congregation or a visitor (cf. Acts 13:15). It was the practice to stand up to read, and to sit down to preach. (vss. 20-21).” (S. MacLean Gilmour, *Exegesis, Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8, p89, 1952)

So it was that Jesus was invited to read and to preach. He had the freedom to choose what to read from the Prophets, and chose the passage from the Book of Isaiah, 61:1-2. It wasn't just chance. The text in *Luke* is taken from the *Septuagint* (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus would have read from the Hebrew. That accounts for why the translation of *Luke* 18-19 does not exactly match *Isaiah* 61: 1-2 in our Bibles. Also, *Luke* in our Bibles has Jesus only reading the first part of 61:2. In some manuscripts “To heal the broken-hearted” is included in verse 19, but is omitted in the more authoritative texts.

When Jesus read these words, they are the words of Isaiah, from the period of the Exile. There would have been a short period of time while the scroll was put away, and Jesus sat down to teach. Anticipation would have been building. Jesus opened his mouth and began teaching by making these words his own. He did this by saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This is the point at which *Luke* has people reacting to Jesus's message. Did they really hear the words? And, how did they hear them?

Jesus, by saying these words are fulfilled, or being fulfilled, is saying:

1. He is the anointed one. That is, the Messiah.
2. He is sent by God to proclaim good news to the poor.
3. He is to proclaim release to the captives.

4. He is to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind.
5. He is to set at liberty those who are oppressed.
6. He is to proclaim “The acceptable year of the Lord”.

All of this was understood as Messiah business. If we accept the notion that Jesus had already been at his mission in Galilee for a while, he has already been doing these things. We can read about the specifics in *Mark* or *Matthew*, or later in *Luke*. But the list doesn't include, so far, any special favors for his home town. There was also, so far, none of the expected military operations to remove Roman control and create a kingdom, God's kingdom, in which the Jews would assume leadership positions over the whole world. Indeed, a reading of Isaiah about the “Servant of the LORD” would later reveal that Jesus was not that kind of Messiah. It was not understood by his listeners at the time. Indeed, even his own disciples did not understand. They would not understand until after the Resurrection.

That Jesus accepted the role of the Servant of the LORD from *Isaiah*, rather than the more militant or earthly versions of the contemporary expectations of a messiah, must remain a source of wonder and awe. This series of lessons is about Calling. In the simple words of his message, Jesus publicly accepts his calling to be Messiah. He does that in front of those who know him best. But he has to be honest with them that they will not be getting what they might expect. This is the very image of integrity. He tells them the truth. Being “chosen” does not mean being singled out for special privileges and honors and wealth and ease by God.

Israelite history testifies to that. How many times were the Israelites or Jews oppressed and subjugated, and even completely removed from the land of promise, before being restored so as to serve God's purpose? Indeed, it may be that their identification as God's chosen people actually led them to be more difficult and rebellious than would otherwise be the case. The opponents wrote to the King of Persia concerning the exiles rebuilding Jerusalem, “... **a search may be made in the annals of your ancestors. You will discover in the annals that this [Jerusalem] is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it long ago. On that account this city was laid waste. ...**” (Ezra 4:15) This report was not inaccurate! In Roman times, Jerusalem would be laid waste again in 70 A.D. and yet there was still another Jewish rebellion six decades later. Yes, the Jews wanted their independence. So did many peoples. But yet, when danger loomed, the kings of Israel and Judah were quick to yoke

themselves to the superpowers of the day, Babylon and Assyria and later Rome, rather than trust God.

Jesus would later say to Pontus Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Pilate did not understand, and indeed did not care to understand. It was easier to do what the Jewish leaders were demanding. What did this Jesus matter? But, in a way he could not have understood, the world changed forever.

Political power and military might no longer are the ultimate arbiters of human existence. There was something more powerful at work, then and now, and it changed the world. We in the United States are beneficiaries of that change. For all its faults, this country, and many other countries, are considerably removed from the kind of politics of the first century. Yes, there is still corruption. There is still favoritism. There is still power given to relatives and favored families. But those things are not our ideals. Those things usually have to hide, and be performed behind closed doors, rather than in the naked displays of power like the emperors of the first century and before. Even the travesty of Communism pretended to be for the benefit of the common worker, however perverted the actual practice.

Let us give thanks, as our Christmas season continues, for the great gift of Jesus the Christ and his message and act of salvation for the world. May we but live out our part of that continuing ministry, finding, each of us, our own calling.

Prayer: God of good news, help us to see the ways you are calling us to make your blessings known. Help us honor the way you have gifted us to proclaim your Good News and help us serve you faithfully. Amen.