

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 23, 2022

The Lessons: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19:7-14
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:16-30

The Hymns: # 839 *O Christ, Our True and Only Light*
836 *O God of Light, Your Word, A Lamp Unfailing*
401 *From God the Father, Virgin Born*

The Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reign with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
"The Hometown Prophet"
Luke 4:21-32

I. The Prophet in His Hometown

"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Those are the words of Jesus as He sits to teach in His hometown synagogue. The people start to chatter, amazed at His gracious words. But what's their reaction--is it joy? Anger? Is it somewhere in between? We'd better back up a little bit.

It is the Sabbath Day, and Jesus goes to the synagogue. When He stands to read, the attendant hands Him the scroll for the day, rolled open to Isaiah 61. Jesus reads to the congregation:

"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD."

It's a well-known passage to the hearers--it's all about the Messiah who will come someday. When the Lord sends His anointed Savior, the Savior will preach and heal and set free. For centuries and generations, devout worshipers have heard this text, praying that some day the Savior will come, some day this prophecy will be fulfilled.

You can understand that it causes quite a stir when Jesus goes on to say, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." With those words, Jesus has just proclaimed to them all, "I am the Messiah. The time has come. The Savior that Isaiah prophesied is standing right in front of you, fulfilling Scripture as I speak."

No wonder the room is buzzing. The Messiah stands before them? Could it really be? On the one hand, they've heard some stories about what Jesus has been doing in the villages around, and many are excitedly wondering if He is, in fact, the Savior. But on the other hand...He's Jesus. He's Joseph's

kid. He used to toddle around town and spend time in the carpenter's shop. A good boy, but so ordinary-looking and way too familiar. Could He really be the Messiah?

And what does He mean by saying, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"? They've heard Him speak, but Isaiah talked about miracles, too. The Messiah gives sight to the blind, relieves the oppressed and sets the prisoner free. But so far, Jesus is all talk and no action around town, and a lot of people talk an awful lot. If He's going to call Himself the Messiah, then He'd better back it up with some miracles. They want proof. It's like some guy who comes through, claiming to be a doctor and talking up his wonderful cures; but guys like that still get sick, too. If they can't even keep themselves healthy, then why should anyone trust them?

There may be one more strike against Him: When Jesus is an adult, there is no mention of Joseph, only Mary. It is likely that Joseph is dead; and if the Savior can't even heal His own step-father, then how can He be the Savior?

Jesus addresses their concerns:

"You will surely say this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.' " Then He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. "But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; "but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. "And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

What the Lord is saying is this: The words are more important than the miracles. Elijah was a great prophet; but in a time of dire famine, he only helped out one Gentile widow while many others were starving (1 Kgs 17:8ff). Elisha was Elijah's successor had a double portion of Elijah's spirit; but while there were many lepers dying of the disease in his time, he only helped out Naaman, the Syrian (2 Kgs. 5:1ff). People might have wanted more miracles, more often, from Elijah and Elisha; but that isn't what those prophets were there to do. They were there to proclaim God's Word. The wonders were occasional things to validate their authority. If they spent all their time doing wonders and not preaching the Word, they might be more popular; but they wouldn't be doing what God had given them to do.

Likewise, Jesus. The Savior comes as priest, king...and prophet, proclaimer of God's Word. The Word is at the top of the Messiah's job description-so much so that Jesus doesn't just preach the Word, but He is the Word (Jn. 1:1). He will perform miracles along the way: He will make the blind see and the deaf hear, and He will cleanse the leper and heal the lame. Why? Because of the Word.

Because the Word said that the Savior would do so, and so Jesus fulfills the Word. By fulfilling the Word with occasional miracles, Jesus demonstrates that He's the Savior to be listened to. But the Word He speaks is far more important than those miracles He does! He heals some who are blind, but their eyes will close again in death. He heals some who are deaf, but the grave will stop their hearing once again. He makes some who are lame to walk, but they will lay down again in their tomb. Those miracles only last a little while. But the Word that Jesus proclaims is far different: It is the Word of the kingdom of heaven. It is the proclamation of eternal life, eternal healing and eternal joy-won by the

Savior and given with forgiveness. Those miracles of healing are for a few; this Word of salvation is for all; and that Word of salvation is what the Savior is all about.

Jesus always emphasizes His Word over miracles. In fact, where people believe the Word and thus honor it, He performs many wonders. But where people do not believe Him, few miracles take place. It is not that the faith of believers somehow empowers Him to work wonders; rather, the rejection of Him and His Word by unbelievers proclaims that they do not want His help.

Like the prophets of old, Jesus works wonders, but His focus is on the Word of God. And like the prophets of old, He is rejected. If all Jesus is going to do is talk, then He's not the sort of Savior they want. The congregation turns into a mob, and they drag Jesus from the synagogue to the brow of the hill, ready to throw Him off the cliff.

Ironically, only 20 verses before, Jesus has just been tempted by the devil to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple-if He's the Savior, He'll survive. Now, the mob isn't going to give Him the option. He's not getting away, and they're going to throw Him down because He won't do any miracles.

And ironically, the mob finally does get a miracle. Jesus simply walks right through the midst of them and goes on His way. It's not time for the Savior to die yet, and no one can put Him to death until He goes willingly.

That time will come, of course. Jesus will not be physically attacked again until Good Friday, three years down the road. Then He will walk weakly, but willingly, to Calvary and allow Himself to be crucified. Why does He submit? Because He is faithfully keeping the Word. Unchanging in His desire for our salvation, on the cross the stricken, smitten and afflicted Son of God is still fulfilling Isaiah as He is wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. He hasn't changed.

Neither has the heart of man. In Nazareth three years before, the cry was, "Physician, heal Thyself!"- "If You're the Savior, prove it and we'll believe!" On Calvary, the mob mills below Him and shouts, "Save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" (Matt. 27:40). But though He is certainly able, He doesn't save Himself and come down from the cross. He stays there, faithful, to fulfill His Father's will, to keep His Word, so that you and I might have salvation.

2. The Useful Church

The world will consider the message of Christ crucified and risen to be useless, impractical and irrelevant.

Look at Elijah and Elisha, and the rest of the Old Testament prophets. They were rather popular when they were doing signs and miracles; but when any of the prophets were preaching God's Word and warning of His righteous judgment against their disobedience, people usually cared nothing for what they had to say, even tried to kill them.

Look at Jesus Himself in this Gospel lesson. The Son of God tells a synagogue full of worshipers that they are looking at the Messiah who has come to save them from sin and give them eternal life; but

because He won't do any miracles of healing, they deem Him useless and offensive and try to throw Him off a cliff.

But here is the thing: Whether people receive or reject the preacher and the Word, it is still the Lord's Word. It is not the preacher whom they receive or reject, but Christ Himself (Matt. 10:40; Lk. 10:16). And whether or not people receive the Word, it is still most useful, for it proclaims the forgiveness of sins and eternal life for the sake of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Its worth is not determined by how sinners treat it. Its value is determined by the Savior who speaks it.

Therefore, do not for a moment believe that the Church has got the message right when the world likes what it hears. As the world grows more and more secular and godless, the Church which proclaims God's Word will appear more useless and irrelevant to the unbeliever. The world will always praise a church which departs from the Gospel in order to fulfill some other societal need. To the world, a church is finally doing what it is supposed to do when it fills emotional needs, when it focuses solely on helping the needy, or devotes all of its energies to defend those who are discriminated against. A church body that defends sinful sexual orientation will be considered useful by the world; a church that condemns sexual immorality will be considered bigoted and in need of condemnation. Within the Church, the pressure is always on to make the sermons and services meaningful and relevant to the non-believer, and tell them about sin, cross and forgiveness later on. Maybe.

Of course, we need to be careful here. As Christians, in obedience to God's Word, we do seek to help those who are in need. But we do not sacrifice God's Law and approve of sin in order to gain the world's approval. And may it never be that we sacrifice the Gospel in order to please the world.

Because whether or not the world is pleased or understanding, God's Word is what the world most dearly needs. If we fail to preach God's Law clearly and appropriately, then the world will never hear that sin is in fact an offense before God in need of forgiveness. And if we fail to preach God's Gospel clearly and pointedly, then the world will never hear that Christ has died to redeem the world.

Even if the world does not understand the message of the Church and considers it useless, the Gospel we proclaim is that which offers eternal life to all who hear. May we not devalue the Word based upon the world's opinion, but proclaim it for the pearl of great price that it is! May we never seek to make our worship user-friendly for the visitor in a way that diminishes the proclamation of Law and Gospel; but may we proclaim sufficient Law and Gospel each week so that any visitor hears enough to repent of sin and be forgiven by Christ.

Here are the sins at work: If we cease to preserve and proclaim the Lord's Law and Gospel, we have let the world determine its value. We have said, "The world thinks this is useless, so it must be." We have let unbelievers determine that the Truth is not true. Furthermore, if we cease to share God's Word because we think we are doing something wrong when it offends, then we doubt God's Word when He promises that it will offend. For such sins, O Lord, forgive us. From such sins, O Lord, preserve us.

Here is the Good News: Whether or not we or the world place a high value on the Gospel, it remains the Lord's effective Word for salvation and the forgiveness of sins. The Lord continues to send forth

His Word, and it will not return to Him empty. He continues to call us to repentance for our failure and apathy; because He did not fail, but went to the cross and died for such sins. He continues to send His Gospel out into the world, no matter the world's opinion. His sheep are scattered, and He will not rest until He has gathered them into His fold.

Here is some more Good News: It is true that the Lord Jesus did not heal everyone who was blind, deaf or lame; and it is true that He performed these miracles chiefly to demonstrate that He was the Savior. But it is also true that, by these miracles, the Lord gave us a glimpse of heaven. If you are afflicted in mind or body, then take heart: the Lord will heal you of all your diseases on the Day of Resurrection-not just for a little while, but for eternity.

That is the hope that we proclaim. The world will always reject the Lord as useless or worse. Still haunted by our sinful nature, our appreciation for His gifts will come and go. But we close with a proclamation that should give you joy; for even as it highlights our sin, it also points you to His faithfulness and life: Even if you don't find it useful today, the Lord has still died for you. Even if you feel no practicality, He declares that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.