

Title: Viewing Prophets From Afar
Text: Luke 4: 21 – 30
Date: February 3, 2019

We really do need some context here, so let's go back to the beginning of the chapter. There we are reminded of the account of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Then Jesus returns to Galilee, where he really begins his ministry. He enters Nazareth – his hometown – and there we hear Luke's account of his first public words . . . in a sense, his first sermon, where he lays out his mission statement. He goes to the synagogue, as was his custom, where he chooses to read these prophetic words from Isaiah:

**"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."**

He rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and sits down. The eyes of all in the synagogue are fixed on him. Then he breaks the silence by saying to them, **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."** Talk about a "drop the mic" moment! What was *that* all about?

What follows might seem a little confusing, but I would like to frame this exploration by highlighting two different verses. Verse 22 reads: **"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."** Then skipping ahead a little we read starting with verse 28, **"When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff."** Talk about a mood swing! In a matter of only five verses we go from "all spoke well of him" to "all were filled with rage."

What happened? Figuring that out is going to force us to both learn more about Jesus, more about scripture, *and* more about mob mentality.

Well apparently in between verse 22 and verse 28 Jesus said some stuff that ticked people off. It almost seems as though Jesus didn't know to quit while he was ahead! But perhaps quitting while he was ahead was never his goal. Perhaps, knowing that time was of the essence, laying his cards on the table was the plan.

All Jesus did was allude to a couple of stories from the Old Testament. He refers to a story from I Kings 17 about Elijah and a certain widow at Zarephath of Sidon, coupled with a story of God healing Naaman the Syrian through Elisha, found in II Kings 5.

I am waiting for a reaction. None of you appear to be very shocked. You aren't ready to throw Jesus off the cliff? Could it be that people in Jesus' day knew the scriptures better than Presbyterians in Shepherdstown? We can't afford the time to review these stories in depth, but let me lay out some clues for you.

Two famous prophets are referenced: Elijah and Elisha. Of all the stories about these two famous prophets that could have been picked, he picks two about prophetic ministry to people who were *not* part of the people of Israel - ministry done on behalf of those who were *not* part of the hometown crowd.

In a drought-stricken, famine-ridden land of many widows, God designated one particular widow, a nonbeliever, to make known God's presence and power. In the healing of the widow's son, God far surpasses the miraculous, life-giving food provided the widow, her family, and Elijah. And thereby prompts a joyous exclamation of her belief. **"Now I know that you are of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."** (I Kings 17:24)

The second story involves the healing of the Syrian Naaman's leprosy. Naaman, who was initially resistant to Elisha's prophetic instructions, eventually immersed himself seven times in the Jordan and was healed of his leprosy. As a leader in the Syrian army, he epitomized a tangible threat to Israelites. Again, even though many in Israel suffered from this illness, we find an "outsider" being healed.

The implication is that Jesus, too, has a ministry that is directed at those beyond the borders of his hometown. Both of these examples represented the extreme "other" to those in the synagogue crowd, and they served to drive home the point that Jesus' interests were far bigger than the hometown. Luke is introducing his readers to the idea that Jesus' saving ministry is available to all. And here in Jesus' initial proclamation of good news, he makes it clear that he will not be a prophet who serves the special interests of his hometown, but rather a messenger of good news for the whole world, and especially the vulnerable.

We tend to like to domesticate our prophets, de-fang them, and keep them at a distance. I thought of this recently when celebrating Martin Luther King Day. It is easy to put a post on a Facebook page quoting Martin Luther King saying, **"I have decided to stick with love."** We can be, **"amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."** (v. 22) By contrast, we might squirm when he says, **"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."** Some might want to throw him off the cliff when he says, **"We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was legal."** We forget that Martin Luther King didn't have nearly as many fans in the church then, as he does today . . . now that he is at a safe distance.

How might you have responded to Jesus' claim that his understanding of "the chosen people" no longer made you the center of the universe? How might you have responded if you thought Martin Luther King was suggesting you might be "the oppressor?" Consider that the masses just might take their cue from how you respond.

There was a fascinating cover article in the January 21st edition of New York magazine about the thousands of closeted gay priests in the Catholic Church. I was moved by a story towards the end of the article.

Father Gregory Greiten was a celibate Catholic priest who came to a point in his life, after 25 years in the priesthood, when he needed to be honest with his conservative congregation about who he was. In 2017 he found his way to a retreat for gay priests, and now he couldn't lie about himself anymore *and* retain his integrity. The article describes the Sunday he came out to his congregation: **"That Sunday morning, when he stood up to deliver his homily, he felt his mouth dry up. The church was packed, and as he started to tell his story, the silence was close to unbearable. He soldiered on. No response. . . . Eventually, a woman stood up in the pews and he braced himself. 'God bless you, Father! God bless you!' she yelled. And then, all at once, the congregation rose and applauded. At the end of the homily, another standing ovation."**

I think about the power of that initial response. When Jesus "came out" about no longer being the darling of the in-crowd, and how he was truly proclaiming good news to those at the

margins, and letting the oppressed go free . . . there must have been one person who was first to say, *"Let's drive him out of town, and hurl him off the cliff!"* Crowds are easily influenced.

I think about the power of that initial response. When there was a hush that hung over the crowd, I thank God for that woman who stood up in the congregation and yelled, **"God bless you, Father! God bless you!"**

It is easy to speculate from afar how you might have responded to a prophet of old. It is harder to know how you'll respond when one comes in person and takes you off guard. Will you be the first to give voice to your discomfort, and suggest this prophet be driven out of town? Or will you be the first to blurt out, **"God bless you! God bless you!"** Will you be an opinion leader, or an opinion follower?

As a post-script to our story, someone later asked Father Greg if he had any regrets about coming out. He responded by saying, **"Do you know what freedom is? Because if you do, you wouldn't have asked the question. This year has been one of the best years of my life. I feel much closer to Jesus."**

As we prepare our hearts now to gather around this Table together, may we be open to receiving grace afresh, and identifying with the One who came **"to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

Amen

Sullivan, Andrew "The Gay Church" January 21, 2019, *New York Magazine*.

Luke 4: 21 – 30

“Then he began to say to them, **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”** “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, **“Is not this Joseph’s son?”** “He said to them, **“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”** “And he said, **“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. “But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”** “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. “They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. “But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.