

Luke 4:14-30

Today's gospel provides the opening scene in the ministry of Jesus. It is Jesus' manifesto for the work ahead. Our passage opens with Jesus returning from the wilderness to Galilee in the power of the Spirit after having overcome temptation. When he returns, a report is heard about him throughout the region, and he travels around teaching in the synagogues.

Jesus' work is accompanied by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit in Luke's Gospel leads, fills, and empowers for prophetic work. Such characters as Zechariah, his wife, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and John experience the Spirit and proclaim truth through the filling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself is filled with the Holy Spirit who then leads him into the wilderness for a time of fasting and testing. So, when we see Jesus being led by the Spirit, we should not be surprised to encounter guidance, empowerment, and prophetic words.

Jesus comes back to preach on Homecoming Sunday. And who says you can't go home again? In the season of Epiphany, the question posed by the popular Christmas carol, "What child is this?" is asked and answered. What child is this, who, since Christmas Eve, has been growing and becoming strong? It's no secret. Everybody we've met in the first three chapters of the Gospel of Luke has been whispering or shouting it out to us. From the angel Gabriel, to Elizabeth and Zechariah, to the angels, to the shepherds, to John the Baptist.

In today's episode, he's all grown up and coming back to the town where he

was brought up to bring the morning's message at the services. Nazareth was an agricultural village on a major trade route and was close to the Galilean capital, Sephoris, which was being rebuilt during the time that Jesus was growing up.

His home townies fidget with excitement in their synagogue seats, waiting for the boy who knows how to make the best shelves in town, whose habit, strange for a teenager, was to pray alone in the hills, and who didn't get on the bus on that field trip to Jerusalem, making his mother go gray with worry. They wait for the boy who, by all accounts, has made good in the big bad world. They've heard the buzz – people are saying he is filled with the power of the Spirit. As he teaches in the synagogues around the area, he is praised by everyone.

And now he's coming home. There have been too many years of one cruel, crackpot Gentile ruler after another – the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans; Alexander, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, and Herod. But now their boy is coming home to put their backwater town on the map, to put some money in their pockets and some bread on their tables.

So they sit in their synagogue seats craning their necks to catch a glimpse of him. The town sign maker is yawning; he stayed up late finishing the banner that is now draped across the entry gate to town that says, "Welcome to Nazareth, home of Jesus." The City Council members in the front row are jazzed. They can't wait to show him the drawings for his Ministry Centre to be built on some prime real estate just south of town. They've contacted PrimeTime, 60 Minutes, and 20/20; they are

working up a broadcast deal with Rogers Broadcasting and a book deal with Warner Faith Books. They've got him a webmaster and got him all set to start blogging and uploading his sermons to YouTube.

There is their boy, striding down the centre aisle of the synagogue. And now he's reading what is given to him to read – a passage from the prophet Isaiah that speaks of a mysterious suffering Servant.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He had sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight of the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

The people buzzed with admiration. "Such a beautiful passage that speaks of a mysterious servant whom God calls to lead the nations, who is horribly abused, takes the punishment due to others and is ultimately rewarded. Such an inspiring description of the Servant preaching the good news and bringing healing and justice to the nation. The Servant must be a metaphor for us, for our nation! What a lovely passage! And his voice, so melodious! His eyes, so glowing. His manner, so confident! We see what all the fuss is about now. What a fine speaker!"

He's rolling up the scroll, giving it back to the attendant, and sitting down. We can't take our eyes off him. We are mesmerized! What uplifting and comforting words will he have for us?

Listen to what he says now: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Could he be implying that he thinks he is the Messiah? Or at least a prophet like Elisha or Elijah? Is he saying that he is the one God has sent to bring them release from all captivity, outward and inward? Is he saying that he will bring good news to the needy, forgiveness of sins to everyone? That's some pretty big talk!

Still, he is a fine public speaker. He might bring considerable income and repute to our little town. But let's hear him out, even though we already know what he's going to say. He'll begin by praising us for the warm welcome. And then he'll praise us as Jews for our superior righteousness to Gentiles. He'll close by thanking us, calling us individually by name, for the nurturing we provided for him when he was growing up. Then he'll stay for a few weeks and heal and teach and draw lots of tourists to town to buy food from our food trucks and souvenirs from the gift shop and some overnighters for our inn. This will be a really good thing for us.

And that's just the thing – these people know you, and so it's hard to preach, because familiarity..., well, you know. The funny thing is, though, that no matter how much they know, no matter how much they've seen or remember, they're usually terribly, terribly gracious, just glad to have you home, pleased that you've made good, proud of your accomplishment.

And that's pretty much the way it starts out in today's reading. Jesus has come home; he's preaching to a crowd of people who've known him since he was just knee high; and they are pleased, and proud, and gracious. "Why, isn't that Joseph's

boy?” “Just a poor carpenter, he was, when he left us. And look at him now.” “Where did he learn to read? And with such authority? He was born to it, I’m telling you, born to it.” By all accounts it’s a beautiful scene. So what goes wrong? How does this tender little homecoming turn suddenly so ugly.

But now, we need to stop woolgathering and listen to what he has to say. He's seated now and has opened his mouth to speak. The people sit expectantly in their seats. Jesus, their hometown boy, is about to bring the message of the morning. They remind us of the audience at the Golden Globes, all dressed up in their finery, waiting to be praised and given awards. And the host, whatever comedian or popular talk show host has been chosen to emcee the whole thing, has been tasked with insulting them in a humorous way, but not to go too far.

Sometimes, the insults are premeditated and well rehearsed. Other times, the recipients have not prepared an acceptance speech. Fortunately, for the insulters at the Golden Globes, there don't seem to have been any life-threatening repercussions. Some laughed, some made no comment, some took their the insults in stride, some had their feelings hurt, a few were angry and defensive.

Jesus insults his crowd, asserting that he won't be able to minister with healing power in his hometown. Why? Perhaps because they think they know him too well? Perhaps because they want the gifts he will bring all for themselves and not for outsiders? He gives examples of Gentiles who responded to God's actions when Jews did not: the widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian.

Jesus is no Golden Globe nominee shooting from the hip because he hasn't bothered to prepare an acceptance speech. He's no Golden Globe host or presenter, shooting zingers to show how witty he is and to bring a laugh. He knows exactly what he intends to say: he intends to point out the truth to his audience. That's what prophets do, in their hometowns and beyond. If his hometown folks are offended, let them prove him wrong by heeding his teachings and amending their lives.

It's hard to hear an uncomfortable truth without getting defensive and angry and responding, "How dare you talk to me that way!" All the people in the synagogue must have done a collective shudder when Jesus said, "But the truth is ..." Probably because they heard what we hear: "You're not my whole world anymore, you're not my kind of people. And by the way, I'm not even all that grateful for who you once were to me, what you did for me, how you cared for me." Ouch!

Is Jesus really saying that the Gentile and the Pagan can know God even more intimately than the Chosen People, or - gasp - that they are just as known... and just as favoured... by their God?

Jesus' message to Nazareth was hard: He gave them a history lesson. God sent Elijah to feed a non-Jewish widow in a time of famine. Why? Perhaps because she was willing to first share her bread with him. God sent Elisha to heal a non-Jewish leper, Naaman the Syrian. Why? Perhaps because he was willing, albeit after some negotiations, to receive God's healing. They are livid when Jesus claims that

the blessings he brings will go to others whom they disdain and not to the people in their town. They didn't like the implication that they have no one to blame, but themselves.

Nobody else had the guts to tell them what Jesus told them and tells us: "You won't be able to claim God's blessings for your life unless you claim them for other people's lives at the same time." Nobody else but you has the power to accept this hard message as the guiding light of your life. Nobody else but you has the power to accept Jesus' gifts of peace, forgiveness, and justice for your life.

There was once a young American who got a job as a tour guide for church groups from the U.S. touring the Holy Land. He would stand at the front of the bus with the microphone and point out the sights as the bus rolled through this town and that. He studied hard and did a good job, but he says that at first he felt like he just had to know the answer to every question. And he got all kinds of them.

One time, they were touring by Nazareth with a bus full of people. He pointed out the window and said, "This may well be the hill from which the people of Nazareth in Luke's Gospel, tried to cast off Jesus." At this, an old Catholic priest who had seemed to be sleeping at the back of the bus, raised his head and asked, "What is it called?" The young man searched his memory wildly for a moment and then blurted out, "It's called the Mount of Jumpification."

Everybody has their own internal *Mount of Jumpification* – where they have the choice to reject Jesus and his message and his gifts. Or not. Where they have

the opportunity to give up prejudice and celebrate the fact that God's mercy and liberation are meant for all. Where they give up defensiveness, accept the prophetic critique, and commit themselves to Jesus' kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Between what Jesus says and how we respond, there is a question mark, there is suspense. We ourselves hang from a cliff – will we accept the hard truth about our lives and our acceptance or rejection of God through Jesus, or will we close our ears? The text ends in this mysterious and hopeful way – Jesus, passing through the midst of them, went on his way. The good news is that we can't get rid of him so easily.

Jesus' words challenge us to choose to hear that he has not come to save us individually, apart from one another, or privately, through our personal belief, but he comes for us all, and is revealed in us and through us, as we reach out to embrace one another's needs. Yes, salvation is very, very personal. But no, it is never, ever private.

He wants to grow and become strong in our lives, so that it's no secret to us or others that anxiety is weakening but peace is growing, that condemnation of others is weakening, but forgiveness is growing, that apathy toward the suffering of others is weakening, but passion for justice is growing.

When Jesus tells us the truth about ourselves – simply because it is the truth – we have to give up the pretense, surrender every claim: to having it all together, to being perfect, to making it on our own. In a word, when Jesus tells us the truth

about ourselves, we die. But when Jesus goes on to tell us – really, to show us – the truth about God, then we come alive again. We come alive in the spirit of a God who not only knows everything about us, but loves us anyway, a God who loves us so much that God will go to any length to redeem us from all the pettiness, shame, and fear that seem so often to overrun even the most successful of lives. And, alive in the Spirit of God, we will do these things: proclaiming, freeing, comforting, and releasing.

The time of God's favour that Isaiah predicted and Jesus announced is still being fulfilled in our hearing, even now, even here, and always as the Word propels us to lives of service, purpose, and meaning.

And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him. May it be so in our lives and our churches this Epiphany season.

Amen.