

February 1, 2004  
"PROPHET TO THE NATIONS"  
Luke 4:21-30  
Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

With rare eloquence Jesus proclaimed to his own synagogue that the long wait was over. God was on the move, coming to rescue his people, repair the world and make things right. Jesus used the words of Isaiah the prophet, along with his own speech, to imagine a world in which God was in charge.

Over on the left in the synagogue, old Thomas nudged his neighbor and whispered, "Hey, he's good!" Up in the gallery, where the women were seated, Martha said to Rachel, "Isn't that Joseph's boy?" Down front Jacob's stage whisper could be heard two pews away, "I knew he was a good carpenter. But a Rabbi? Who'd have figured?"

Mary, Jesus mother, listened with a dull foreboding and an ache in her heart.

Well, things went bad in a hurry. Jesus knew what his old neighbors were thinking and with courage addressed their skepticism out loud.

He quoted a familiar proverb, "Physician, heal yourself." Then he added, "I know what you're thinking. You heard what I did in Capernaum and you want to see my stuff. 'You talk big. Back it up.'"

Then Jesus added another familiar proverb, "A prophet has no honor in his home town.' I know you're skeptical. You want a prophet. I'll show you a prophet! Here goes."

Jesus began to do what prophets do. The skepticism in the synagogue became anger and swiftly turned into blind rage. Mid-sermon, the congregation rose up, seized Jesus, rushed him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff.

The shadow of the cross fell across Jesus life. And, like the prophet Simeon promised, a sword pierced Mary's heart.

Why the sudden shift of opinion? What stirred up such lethal outrage? In simplest terms, Jesus challenged one of his hearer's most cherished expectations of God. He challenged their basic religious vision.

They knew they were the covenant people of God. They'd been taught and firmly believed that their people were blessed by God. That's basic to the biblical covenant with Abraham. "I will bless you and your descendants," God swore in solemn oath. God was their God. The land was their land. The nation was their nation. They were God's very special people.

They forgot the other half of God's covenant: that living under God's blessing is a means to a larger end. They were called to share that blessing – to bless all the nations of the earth. God's blessed people are obliged by divine covenant to be a blessing to the whole earth.

And, when God's people forgot the second half of the covenant, they turned inward, made God's covenant their exclusive possession and excluded everyone else from the covenant blessing. In fact, before long, they expected God to curse all the other nations on earth – and keep on blessing them.

Soon, a dangerous nationalism poisoned their covenant faith. They assumed that they, God's special people, were good. Everyone else was bad.

They had reason to make that conclusion. Nazareth was no hick town. Three major trade routes passed through their city. The Roman army housed a garrison of soldiers in Nazareth. They'd seen first hand what godless pagans lived like. It wasn't pretty. They'd lived under the iron thumb of the Romans and watched Roman soldiers harass their neighbors and seduce their daughters. They wanted God to punish these invaders and rid their town of evil influences.

Well, Jesus had a very uncomfortable word from God. In his sermon Jesus called the people back to Scripture. He reminded them of their own story in Scripture and called them back under its authority.

One of Flannery O'Connor's short stories is titled, "Revelation." The story begins in a doctor's waiting room. Ruby Turpin, one of the waiting patients, is busy evaluating everyone else in the room. She judges herself superior to all the "white trash" around her and let's them know it.

Across the room a poor, dirty, unkempt teenage girl. Mary Grace, is reading a large book. Ruby is whispering ugly words about the girl. Mary Grace listens to Ruby's negative evaluation about everyone until she can stand it no longer.

Without warning, Mary Grace hurls her book across the room. The book hits Ruby Turpin in the head knocking her to the floor.

This, says Flannery O'Connor, is the violent, shocked beginning of Ruby Turpin's redemption, the catalyst of her repentance.

Or, as William Willimon interprets the story, "Revelation often begins when a large book hits you in the head" (*Christian Century*, January 27, 2004).

Well, Jesus threw a large book at the congregation that day. "Remember the great prophet, Elijah?" Jesus proclaimed. "Scripture says that during a terrible three and a half year famine, God sent Elijah to live with a widow in Sidon. And God fed that Gentile woman and the prophet while Jews starved in Israel."

"Remember Elijah's successor, Elisha?" Jesus added. "And do you remember how the Bible tells about a Syrian General named Naaman, a leper who came to Elisha for help? God healed that pagan soldier while hundreds of Jewish lepers were not healed."

At that, the synagogue went into the rage. The large book hit them between the eyes.

Why? Jesus informed them that God's covenant people have no exclusive claim on God's mercy or blessing. God loved and healed pagans – the Bible teaches it!

No nation, Jesus proclaimed, no church, no people are more special to God than other nations, denominations and peoples.

In other words, Jesus looked his congregation in the eye and said, "You are not so special after all."

Now I have to tell you, that's not a recommended pastoral technique! It goes against everything I was taught in preaching class too. You're supposed to get people on your side then tell them the truth they need to hear!

But Jesus hit them in the head with a large book – their book. “See that Roman soldier who ogled your daughter on the way to synagogue this morning? Well, God is committed to that enemy and wants to include him in the covenant blessing.”

In fact, Jesus teaches that the synagogue and the nation, the church too, all are accountable to the Word of God. It’s the Word, as Jeremiah learned, that tears down and uproots as well as builds and heals. God’s Word is an untamed Word that blesses, to be sure, but judges us too. It’s a large book that hits us right between the eyes.

Well, back in Nazareth, the congregation thought, “Who does he think he is judging us?” And, they tried to throw him off a cliff.

The people of God always face a terrible danger. We tend to bend the Word of God to our own purposes. We use God’s Word and God’s Son to serve us, to meet our expectations of what God does and God’s Word means.

Consider the popular view of Jesus in the church these days. Above all, Christians think Jesus was very, very, nice. He would never judge anyone, never tell us no and never disapprove of our choices. He wants to be our best friend.

This view was made popular, in part, by the writings of a Christian celebrity who said Jesus never called anyone a sinner. (He was far too nice for that!)

True enough. But Jesus did call church members a bunch of snakes, hypocrites and white washed tombs full of dead men’s bones! He told Peter, first among his disciples, that he was full of the Devil. “Get behind me,” he said. “I don’t want to see you right now!”

Jesus was the friend of sinners but he is not the friend of the self-righteous, the smug, the arrogant and self-assured. Jesus is Lord and he holds us accountable. But we prefer intimacy to accountability. God loves us very much but God holds us accountable to the Word of God. From time to time we need a large book to hit us in the head.

This is a prophetic word the church in America needs to hear. We’re in the habit of wrapping our patriotism around our Christianity and viewing the world (and God) through American eyes. But Jesus said no nation has special privileges from God whether it’s the USA, Austria or Israel.

The danger to the church, I suspect, is more subtle. Success is big these days and the church has bought into the power of success. Bigger is better – that means success – and the way to get bigger is good marketing. That means telling people what they want to hear. After all, to get and keep people we have to make them feel good, uplifted at all times and we dare not sound like we’re passing judgment – except on the sinners out there in the world.

That’s a dangerous habit. Before long, people like me find ourselves bending God’s word in alien directions. After all, we can’t offend anyone. You have to keep people feeling good. Finally we don’t tell the truth anymore. We don’t hold people and ourselves accountable to the Word of God, that large book that hits us where we need it. And we sure don’t hit people in the head with a large book! After all, who wants to get thrown off a cliff?

I’m haunted by a sentence written by the Apostle Paul – written to a church that certainly needed to hear the truth and be held accountable. “If I speak to please people,” the apostle wrote, “I am no longer the servant of Christ.”

But the real Jesus loves us too much to let get away with it. The Savior is not content to leave us alone like we are. Jesus the Savior is also the Lord, a Lord who holds us accountable to himself and a large book.

Jesus' call to follow him is at the same time a call to hear him and obey him. He once said, "Don't call me Lord if you don't do what I say."

Jesus loves us too much to leave us like we are. This is good news. Jesus told Peter the Devil would sift him like wheat – he'd mess up big time! And he did. Jesus also told him he'd pray for him and when it was over he'd make him better for it. And he did!

Jesus calls us, "Follow me. Hear me. Obey me." And we'll never be the same!