

NOT A HOMETOWN HERO
Luke 4:14-30

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Everything depends on this passage, this preacher, this sermon. Jesus is in his own hometown, Nazareth, where he spent his childhood years growing up as the son of Mary and Joseph (Luke 4:22). As always, he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath. The attendant hands the rabbi (teacher) the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus works the scroll down to the passage of his choosing, Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

He rolls the scroll shut and hands it back to the attendant. As was the custom of teachers in his day, he sits down to teach. Luke builds a sense of anticipation when he writes, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him” (Luke 4:20). What will this rabbi— this one who has been doing miracles in Capernaum—say about the text of Isaiah? What Jesus says can never be taken back. These are the words that change absolutely everything for everybody—“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

Why is this sermon in this synagogue such a big deal? Why has everything changed now that the rabbi has made clear that “today” is the day and he is “the one”? What exactly was Jesus saying? How were they hearing it? And why the violent response?

Let us begin unpacking perhaps the most important episode in Luke’s entire Gospel. This passage sets the paradigm for all that will come to pass in Luke’s Gospel. Rejection in Nazareth will eventually lead to rejection in Jerusalem. And yet, it will still be true: “today” is the day of fulfillment.

In the Power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14)

Once again, Luke reminds us that everything about Jesus involves the Spirit of God. He has previously told us that Jesus was “conceived” by the Spirit (1:35), “anointed” by the Spirit at his baptism (3:22), and “led” by the Spirit in his showdown with the devil in the wilderness (4:1). Having previously faced conflict with Satan himself, Jesus now faces conflict with his own neighbors in Nazareth.

In our previous passage, Luke 4:1-13, Jesus clearly aligned his own desires with the desires of God by standing firm in the face of every temptation the evil one might use to try to persuade Jesus to avoid the way of the cross. The obedience itself was proof positive that Jesus was ready to begin his public ministry.

In Their Synagogues (Luke 4:15)

Much like churches today, synagogues of antiquity were more about the people than the place. Thus, strictly speaking, a synagogue was a gathering of people for the reading of scripture and prayer. Early on, such gatherings occurred in modified rooms in private homes. In time, however, people were able to afford special buildings built for communal gatherings for reading scripture, teaching, and prayer.

Luke lets us know that Jesus was teaching in the Galilean synagogues. As we witness the ministry of Jesus through reading the New Testament, we realize that Jesus, basically, did three things during his three years of ministry: he taught; he healed; and he cast out demons. We will encounter all three aspects of our Lord's ministry in Luke's Gospel.

While not yet giving us a glimpse of the content of Jesus' teaching, Luke, nonetheless, describes the response of the hearers to Jesus, "praised by all." The word used by Luke for "praised" (or literally "glorified") finds its root in the noun "glory" (*doxa*). Having already read the first few chapters of Luke, we are familiar with the association of "glory" with Jesus. Remember Luke 2:9, "And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them (shepherds), and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened." Suddenly this angel was joined by a heavenly host which proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (v. 14). As God had been glorified, now Jesus is glorified. At the end of the shepherds' story, moreover, the shepherds went back "glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen..." (v. 20).

As chapter 2 continues, Simeon, the righteous and devout man who had been promised that he would see the Lord's anointed before his death, took Jesus into his arms and declared, "For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel" (2:30-32). While Simeon declared that this baby, Jesus, will be "a light of revelation to the Gentiles" (2:32), we will soon learn that this inclusive nature of the gospel brings joy to some and resistance and anger from others. Perhaps the greatest use of glory, however, occurs at the crucifixion when the centurion "began to glorify God" (23:47) as he saw Jesus as the innocent Son of God (see also Matthew 27:54).

On the Sabbath (Luke 4:16)

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Nazareth is mentioned as the home of Mary and Joseph. Nazareth has been estimated to have a population of less than 400 in the first century. Archeological excavations of the area have also indicated that it was quite poor, since excavations have found no paved streets, public structures, or fine pottery. In the synagogue, scripture was both read and explained. The setting was open and inviting, as free exchange was encouraged among those assembled. Not only was it Jesus' "custom" to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath, it was also his custom to expound upon the scriptures as a teacher. We would do well to understand that the lesson taught in this synagogue on this Sabbath is representative of the many messages of Jesus.

When Luke tells us that Jesus rose up ("stood" NASB) to read, he is foreshadowing that the people will, likewise, rise up to cast him over a cliff (4:29).

In Isaiah (Luke 4:17)

As presented by Luke, the passage itself was chosen by Jesus. Without modern chapter and verse designations, we can only imagine how difficult it was for someone to find a specific passage in a scroll like Isaiah. Undoubtedly, Jesus was so familiar with scripture that he knew exactly where to find the passage. The portion chosen by Jesus is a combination of Isaiah 61:1; 58:6; and 61:2a.

Upon Me (Luke 4:18)

The preposition “upon” communicates the notion that Jesus was more compelled than indwelt. In Isaiah 42:1 we read, “Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations.”

He is to bring the good news to “the poor.” The poor represented in this passage are not only “short on funds,” they are also among those excluded from the Jewish community. To put it plainly, they are the losers in the competitive race for resources. They have no honor, power, place, or position in their culture. Their only resource, therefore, is to look to God and cry out for help. This clear designation of “the poor” as recipients of the good news reminds us how Jesus will begin his beatitudes in Luke 6, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (6:20). Some of Jesus’ followers, his disciples, have left both their homes and their livelihood in order to follow their rabbi (5:11, 28; 18:28-30).

By directing his good news to those pushed out to the margins of the community, Jesus indicates that he himself is refusing to recognize the boundaries of the old order—with his presence, all things are new. While others may have pushed the poor beyond the grace of God, Jesus has opened the door and welcomed them into the family.

Not only do the poor have the gospel preached to them, but the captives receive their release. Luke does not actually envision Jesus unlocking jail cells. He, rather, sees “release” as synonymous with salvation. The captives are those who are bound by the evils of Satan. When Jesus commands the demons to depart, he, thus, is setting the victims free from Satan’s stranglehold. As David Garland notes, “The chains of iniquity (Acts 8:23) incarcerate sinners, and the noun “release” is primarily tied to the forgiveness of sin in Luke-Acts” (Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18).

A third group of recipients received the good news from the anointed one—the blind. Unfortunately, blindness was common in Palestine. In Luke, the description of “blind” may refer to those who were literally blind (see 7:21-22; 18:35-43) or those who are unable to see the goodness of God in the presence of the Christ (1:79; 3:6; Acts 26:17-18). To lead someone to salvation, to see Jesus for who he really is, is to “open their eyes.” For a good example of those “having their eyes opened,” we look to the disciples on the road to Emmaus who suddenly saw the resurrected Jesus for who he was. Luke writes, “And their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him...” (Luke 24:31).

Finally, Jesus has come to set free those who are downtrodden. Here we have a repetition of the language of “releasing.” A literal translation goes something like this: “To send in release for those who are oppressed.” Therefore, we have a repetition of both the ideas of “send” and “release.” By

now, the reader of the original text would have realized that “release” is at the heart of what Jesus has come to accomplish.

To Proclaim (Luke 4:19-20)

I received the strangest call about twenty years ago from the mortgage company. When I gazed at the caller ID and saw the name of our mortgage company displayed, I was a bit intrigued. I knew that our house payments were up-to-date—or at least I knew that my wife was supposed to have them up-to-date. So I answered the phone with a solid, but reserved, “Hello.”

“Is Mr. Howard Batson home?” the caller inquired. She even said Batson, not “Bateson,” a mispronunciation I often get from those irritating salespersons who always seem to call right when you sit down for dinner.

“Mr. Batson,” she continued, “are you sitting down?”

“No, should I be sitting down?” I inquired, with fear and trembling in my voice.

“Mr. Batson, if you’ll hang on the line, the president of the mortgage company would like to speak with you.”

I reviewed everything in regard to our account that I possibly could. We had a thirty-year loan, so we had about twenty-five years remaining.

“Mr. Batson, our records show that you have 302 payments remaining on your mortgage, that you still owe us \$127,000, and that you’ve made every payment on time.”

Everything the bank president said was true. So, why the call?

“Mr. Batson, the reason I troubled you this evening is the board of directors met and, as is our custom every fifty years, we selected a few customers at random, and we completely forgave their debt.”

Is this a joke? The first thing that ran through my mind was “What’s the catch?”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, it’s long been the policy of our mortgage company to just wipe a few accounts clean every fifty years. And we’re happy to inform you, Mr. Batson, that yours is one of those accounts that we are forgiving. Congratulations.”

I did have wits enough about me to ask if she’d send a letter confirming our conversation. She said, indeed, it had already been placed in the mail that very day, and I should have complete confirmation before the week was over.

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve made my day. You’ve made my life!”

And just as quickly as she had called, she hung up—going down the list of lucky customers and liberating them, releasing them from their lifelong debt.

Now that I think about it, that DID NOT really happen. I think that was a daydream I had, actually.

But could you imagine the feeling you would have if, indeed, your mortgage company called and said your debts are cancelled, you are released from all obligations? Could you fathom the freedom? Can you imagine the jubilation at the proclamation of freedom?

While it didn't actually happen to me, it was supposed to happen to the ancient Israelites according to the Holiness Code found in Leviticus 25:6-10. One year out of seven was a Sabbath year, but on the fiftieth year—the year after seven times seven (seven Sabbath years)—we have the year all of all years, the proclamation of Jubilee.

Jubilee began with the blowing, the sounding (v. 9) of the ram's horn. It was to happen on the Day of Atonement, the day when the priest made restitution to God for the sins of the nation.

With the declaration of freedom throughout the land, all debts were cancelled, and all the prisoners (debtor's prison) were set free. You might say Jubilee was something of a new start for poor people. Those who had lost out in life's race had a chance to begin again. It was a point of hope, the year of Jubilee.

The problem was that in the actual history of ancient Israel, the ram's horn was never blown. God is holy, and God is different. He told his people to be different by the observation of the Sabbath, the Sabbath year, and then Jubilee. But ancient Israel NEVER really practiced the year of Jubilee. We have no evidence that it was ever enacted.

In Isaiah 61:1-2, the prophet is clear. When Messiah comes, Jubilee will finally be declared. Jesus blew the horn that day. Jesus sounded the song of liberty for the poor and downtrodden.

In Your Hearing—Today (Luke 4:21)

That "someday" of the Savior is "today." Remember the foreshadowing of this announcement: "To you is born today in the town of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). This proclamation of Jubilee, this arrival of the Messiah, is happening "in your hearing," meaning in community. The problem, however, is clear. Their plan does not match with God's plan, so Jesus has to go! They imagine a plan of Jewish privilege and status; he proclaimed release to all (4:25-27).

From His Lips (Luke 4:22)

While several scholars believe that the reference to Joseph's fatherhood is not a sarcastic smirk, I agree with John Nolland who wrote, "...The parallel words in Mark 6:3 are evidently critical, and the flow in Luke's narrative requires that these words express an objection to Jesus' claims." As will be the case in our Lord's coming crucifixion, the crowd was always fickle when it came to Jesus. At first, they like the words "from his lips" until they realize Joseph's son is claiming to be the Messiah for those outside of respectable Jewish circles.

In Your Hometown (Luke 4:23-24)

Jesus rebukes the crowd even as they reject him. As they comprehend the inclusive message of the Christ, he will not be acceptable to them. His ministry is not restricted to his “hometown,” not even to the Jewish nation.

In the Days of Elijah (Luke 4:26)

Two Old Testament illustrations make clear to whom the Year of Jubilee is pronounced—all, including desperate widows, outcast lepers, and Gentiles! These are the poor captives who need release.

With Rage (Luke 4:28)

Acting with rage, the synagogue attendees immediately fulfill Jesus’ prophecy about a prophet being unwelcomed in his own hometown.

Off the Cliff (Luke 4:29-30)

They are not trying to push him out of town. They are trying to push him off the cliff! This “rejection to death” foreshadows the reaction of the mob in Jerusalem when they call for his crucifixion. By divine rescue, however, Jesus escapes because “his time has not yet come.”