

Unpersuaded
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 61, I John 5:1-15, Luke 4:14-30

Our third scripture lesson this week comes from Luke 4:14-30. Last week, we heard about Jesus' temptation in the desert. This week, Jesus returns to his own region and his own hometown where his ministry begins. Here's what Luke writes... "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed-- only Naaman the Syrian." All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way."

There is no doubt that we are going through one of the toughest times the US has experienced in most of our lifetimes. We aren't to the gas lines of the 1970s or the 25% unemployment rate of 1933, but this area in particular has been hit hard. Daily we hear stories of 450 applicants for a single job and people moving out of Michigan to go anywhere where engineers and skilled tradesmen might find jobs. Some of us here have seen our hours cut or had family members and friends lose jobs. How long the hard times will last, we can't say. They may be over quickly or stay around for a while, but there's no use ignoring them.

There are a lot of reactions we can have to hard times. We can choose to honor God no matter what and to praise Him through the good times and bad times alike. As Christians, we set a unique example to the world when we do that. But often times, we'd like to have someone to blame for our problems, whether it be the CEOs who have multi-million dollar golden parachutes or foreign automakers or somebody, anybody, who has gotten a break.

Believe it or not, it's the same kind of situation that Jesus runs into when he heads home near the start of his ministry. As I've discussed a little before, the Jews in Jesus' day lived under occupation. Now the Jews still lived in their homeland, but they were reminded every day that they were not a free people. Roman taxes burdened them. Roman soldiers were a frequent sight. Pontius Pilate, the Roman assigned to oversee the area, didn't have any respect for them or for their religious beliefs. Rome was the enemy. They could not reconcile the idea that they were God's chosen people with the fact that they were under the thumb of Caesar. Now this didn't mean that they were treated particularly harshly; they were free to worship as they pleased and were not required to become a part of the Roman army. They were not slaves. For the most part, they could live the way they desired. But their expectation was that a messiah was coming who would free them from Roman oppression and finally show to the world the might of the Jewish nation. These expectations were in full swing in Jesus' day.

In the midst of all these thoughts, Jesus comes home after being away. The passage tells us that Nazareth was not the first place he had taught, though he had returned to the region of Galilee where He was from. We know he'd been to Capernaum, which was about 20 miles away, and he'd been teaching throughout the area. As he goes home, excitement is building as word gets around; everybody's been amazed at what he's saying. The Greek text makes it clear that their praise for Him is not unlike praise of God Himself! So when it says people were praising him, it means that they realized that there was something *really* different about Jesus. He was teaching like he really knew who God was and what God desired of His people. When Jesus walks into the synagogue in Nazareth, then, the expectations have gone through the roof.

Everyone in the synagogue is just waiting to hear what he has to say. He's the visiting preacher, so he's been given the privilege of reading the day's lecture from one of the prophets...Isaiah 61, which we heard this morning. After reading the passage, He sits down, which in his day meant he was getting ready to teach. The first thing he says just stuns them...he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." It's as clear as day to his listeners that he is referring to Himself...he is the fulfillment of the promises they have all just heard about. *He* is the promised one, the anointed one. Everybody is kind of awestruck. It seems that Jesus kept on teaching, because they become more and more amazed at his graceful words. They speak well of him. They are impressed.

And then another note is sounded: "*Isn't this Joseph's son?*" There are a lot of ways that the phrase could have been taken. The first one is the one that's most positive...this is the hometown boy who's made good...the one we're all proud of. I'm sure that there were a few in the crowd who were thinking that. But then again, it's asked as a negative question. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" Is this the same funny kid who used to spend his time praying an awful lot? Isn't he the one who got left behind in Jerusalem because he was talking to the priests instead of paying attention to where his parents were? Isn't this the same kid who walked these streets and played with Issac and Nathan and Zach down the road, who grew up right here? There's some disbelief built in because a good number of these folks know Jesus. He might have seemed unique, even strange, as a child, but he was still just a boy. How could *he* be the messiah? It's not all that surprising. A lot of us find ourselves meeting old friends and classmates at a reunion or on Facebook and thinking, "Is that person really who I thought he was?" It's hard for them because Jesus was just one of them, as far as they were concerned.

But then there's another side to it, and it goes something like this... "he's Joseph's boy...he's one of us. He was raised here; we helped bring him up; we're entitled to a share of the action. Jesus should choose us for his best miracles. Jesus should appoint one of us as his commander and another one as his counselor. We should get the seats of honor when Jesus marches into Rome as the glorious conqueror. Finally, we won't be oppressed anymore. Jesus will remember us first. We'll get the good jobs and the prized positions and nobody will be able to tell us what to do any more. Who cares what happens to everybody else? It's payback time."

Jesus knows what all is going on in their hearts, and he calls their bluff. He tells them what they are thinking! He knows that they want him to do the same kind of miracles and signs that he did at Capernaum. They aren't all that interested in following Him on faith; they want to see proof. When they say, "Physician, heal thyself," they are asking Him to do for them what He has already done for others. But it's not really healing they're interested in. They are more interested in the glory and the power; they really aren't all that interested in who Jesus really is...the Son of God, who has come not to impress the world but to save it. They want to be convinced. They want to be wowed. And they want to be able to claim the glory for themselves...there's a real mixture of emotions here, many of them conflicting. But they all point to one thing: they are unpersuaded. They won't let themselves be. Jesus brushing their request off doesn't make them happy. All of a sudden, all this positivity about Jesus goes south.

But then Jesus does something that takes them from frustration with Him to rage. He tells them about two others prophets, Elijah and Elisha, and he says, "You know, during their ministry, there were a lot of people in need in Israel. But God only sent them to outsiders...to the Gentiles." And this infuriates them. It drives them mad with anger, an anger so strong that they run him out of town and plan to throw him over the side of a cliff. Now there aren't any big cliffs in Nazareth, not any that a fall would kill you, so probably what they were going to do was shove him over one of the large hills and then stone him from above. Jesus somehow gets away, maybe by the power of the Spirit, we don't know. The Father protected Him from harm, we know that much. It's as if he simply decides this is not going to happen and it doesn't. The Father's plans for Jesus are different from what this lynch mob has planned, and so it all comes to nothing. Jesus slips away, and Luke never again records him going back to Nazareth.

So what is it that has them all so upset? It's Jesus disrupting *their* plans by including everybody in *his* plans. Jesus is saying something like this... "I know that you expect me to ride into Jerusalem and declare war on Rome and take all of you into fame and power and glory with me. I know that you want me to do all sorts of amazing things to prove to you that I'm God's Son. I know that you all want to be on top of the heap and everybody else to be on the bottom so that you can finally have power over somebody. But that's not the way it's going to work. I went to Capernaum first because there were a lot of needy people there. There are a lot of needy people who need salvation everywhere, and they aren't just Israelites, but people from all over the earth. All of them need what I have, and my kingdom is going to take care of everyone who would come to me. I am the messiah you *need*, not the messiah you *want*. Deal with it."

Why is Jesus being so harsh with them? Why do they go from so excited to so enraged so quickly? Ultimately, it has to do with the state of their hearts. They saw Jesus as a solution to their problems, but only if he worked things out the way they wanted. They saw Jesus as a magician who would pull tricks out of a hat rather than the Son of God, who used His power not for selfish gain but for the good of those around Him. They saw Him as somebody who would get back at their enemies rather than giving them a fulfilling relationship with God. Jesus tried to set them straight, but they wouldn't listen. For us, this lesson might seem a bit harsh and maybe even hard for us to understand, but I think we can see some teachable moments in this passage. First, we learn that God's plans are bigger than our own. Second, we learn that God's goodness is meant to benefit all people, not just us. Finally, we learn that a heart that's right with God learns to praise Him through all things.

God's plans are bigger than our own. It seems simple, right? But we often don't see the forest for the trees. For example, many years ago, I got a job at Media Play, a big retail store a lot like Best Buy. After four weeks, the store manager came up to me and asked why I wasn't keeping the other employees in line. I told her that I didn't have that authority...I was hired at entry-level. The next day, she called me into her office and said, "Guess what? You're a supervisor over a fourth of the store now. You'll make more money. Go straighten stuff out." I called home; I was so excited. Just four weeks and I'd been promoted and received a raise! The next day, I was called into the manager's office. "Guess what?" she said. "The store's closing in six weeks." I was angry and upset to have had all my great news shattered. I'd been searching for a job for months, and then I was out of a job again. But the truth was, Media Play was not the place for me to be. I eventually found a job working for a cell phone company, and a lot of my experiences there led me to the ministry. I had no idea of all of that. I was just a 22-year-old angry about my circumstances and being out of a job.

The people of Nazareth were in the same situation. They didn't see God's big picture of salvation. All they knew was what they wanted...a messiah to rid them of their problems and to make them into a glorious nation that would rule everybody else. They didn't see God's big picture. They didn't know that Jesus came to establish not an earthly kingdom but God's kingdom that will last eternally. They didn't know that Jesus' message would be for all people. Sure, some would reject it, and some still do. But God knew, and God wasn't going to compromise His big picture to satisfy their temporary desires.

In the same way, there are a lot of events happening right now to us that we don't completely understand. Church of the Covenant is beginning to grow and move past the hardships of the past few years, but we still have a long way to go to make our budget work. Friends right here have lost jobs and aren't sure what to do. We live in a lot of uncertainty about how the whole Detroit situation is going to turn out. But we have two choices. We can choose to grow angry about our circumstances and make them eat at us until they tear us apart. Or we can choose to trust in God and trust that He has a bigger picture in mind that we can't see. It's a difficult decision, and one we have to make day by day. Some days we may fail and see only the negative. But we can strive to remember that God loves us and has our eternity in mind in all of His decisions and in all He allows to happen.

But more, God's goodness plans to benefit all people. God's plan for salvation extends to everyone who would call Jesus Savior and Lord and believe in Him faithfully. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This upset a lot of people back then, and it upsets a lot of people today. Sometimes, we aren't satisfied with just doing well, but we have to do better than the person next to us. It's just like when one person cuts two pieces of pie and the other person gets to decide which one they want. If we were to choose, we'd often choose the biggest piece for ourselves. We get angry when somebody seems to have an advantage over us. Sometimes those advantages are something we're born with; sometimes they are given to us. For those listening to Jesus in Nazareth, they felt they deserved to get ahead because they were God's chosen people. God had made promises to them, but they wanted those promises fulfilled in their own ways, in their own selfishness. But God's goodness extends far greater than our eyes can see.

And for us, it means that we need to keep our eyes open for God's grace. Can we be happy for the person who got a job, even if we haven't found one yet? Is it worth asking that person we see every week at the library to come to church, even if they don't look the part? God wants His grace to extend everywhere, and we can be a part of making that happen. Sometimes, we may even suffer for a little while because through us, God will extend His grace to someone else we'd never ever expect. We have to be willing to get past our own desires to see that God's bigger plan is for everyone.

This leaves us in the valley of decision. Are we going to be angry about our circumstances forever? Or are we willing to praise God in all things? The people of Nazareth couldn't get past the fact that they were one part of God's big plan. They thought that if the Savior was from their town, they should get special treatment. But if they had just embraced God's plan, imagine what part they could have played in Jesus' ministry. In the same manner, we are called on regardless of the situation to praise God. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:11-13, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him [God] who gives me strength." *We can live this way.* The power of the Holy Spirit that was in Jesus Christ now resides in us as believers, and He can empower us to be this content.

This is also where the church comes in. The hardest thing about losing a job or having difficult times is that often you feel like you are all alone. Jesus created the church so that we could be His face to those around us. If you're in the middle of the valley, if it sounds like you're just being told to buck up and get through it, that's not what it's about. The pain and suffering you feel is very real, and it's OK to acknowledge it. It's also OK to let the church come around you and pick you up and help you through the rough times. There is no way we can find God's contentment all on our own; it doesn't work like that. God wants us to find our contentment in Him, but it comes through our being a community, being the church. And hopefully, others who are going through these hard times will see how we pull together through it and will want to know what makes us different, and in that we can share Christ with them.

If you're feeling depressed by your situation or the situation of the world around us, don't despair. God is here, and God is real. His ways are not our ways, but He can show us through our suffering if we don't demand that He fix things our way. If we allow ourselves to be free from envy, free from jealousy, free from the need to be better than the next guy, then God will move us closer to His side and cover us as we walk through those difficult times together. Let's pray.