

Sermon for 30 January 2022 (Epiphany 4)  
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Text: Luke 4:21–30

So today is the fourth Sunday after Epiphany. In these Sundays of the Epiphany season, we are reflecting on Scripture readings that reveal who Jesus is—God in the flesh—and who Jesus is *for us*. In Epiphany, we always get a series of stories from the beginning of Jesus’s ministry in one of the gospels—Matthew, Mark, or Luke, depending on which year we’re in—as Jesus bursts on the scene in Galilee, after his baptism in the Jordan and his temptation in the wilderness—proclaiming the kingdom of God in words and in mighty deeds. This year we are in Luke’s gospel.

So last week we heard about Jesus’s opening sermon in Nazareth of Galilee, his hometown, in Luke 4:16–21. Today we hear the continuation of that story, as the hometown crowd turns on Jesus and drives him out of town. What I want to do with you today is, first, to work through the text, to look at the drama of the story. Then, having looked at the drama of the story, we will ask where we might see ourselves in it, and especially, we’ll reflect on the question, who is Jesus for us, on the basis of this text.

So, first, to the drama of the text. We enter today’s story mid-stream, as it were, right in the middle of the action, which we began to hear about last week. So just a quick reminder of where we are. After his baptism in the Jordan and his

temptation in the wilderness, Jesus has come back to Galilee. Word is already spreading about his Spirit-filled ministry of preaching and mighty deeds. Now Jesus comes back to his hometown, Nazareth, his fame preceding him. He enters the synagogue on the sabbath and is invited to read from the prophet Isaiah. After reading from Scripture, Jesus preaches, announcing that the words of Isaiah are being fulfilled even as he speaks. Jesus announces that he, the one standing before them, is the one who fulfills Scripture—he is the messiah, the one whom God has anointed with the Holy Spirit in his baptism, and whom God has sent to proclaim the good news.

That's where we pick up the story today. At first, the crowd in Nazareth seems to be impressed. They admire Jesus's gracious words. But mixed with that admiration, there also seems to be doubt, skepticism about who Jesus really is. Jesus was the hometown boy, they had known him since he was a little kid—or, at least, *thought* they knew him. Wasn't he the son of Joseph, the carpenter's son, they ask? So what's all this business about Jesus being God's anointed one? With that question, we're reminded of the genealogy, just a chapter before, where Luke says that Jesus, the son of Joseph (**as was thought**) was thirty years old when he began his ministry. Jesus was the son of Joseph, **as was thought**. Quite naturally, that how's Jesus was known, that was his name, Jesus the son of Joseph. But of course, the name, "son of Joseph" did not capture his true, full identity. As Luke

tells us, Jesus was (and is) the Son of God. That's what the folks in Nazareth didn't grasp—Jesus's identity as messiah and Son of God. We'll come back to this point later.

But first, back to the text. Jesus, apparently recognizing the people's doubt and skepticism, makes a provocative comment. He chides the hometown folks, "you will say to me, 'physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you have done in Capernaum, do here also in your hometown." In other words, it seems that the people want Jesus to prove himself. OK, son of Joseph, if you really are who you say you are, the messiah, prove it! We've heard about your mighty deeds of healing and exorcism in Capernaum, so now, show your spiritual power here also. Jesus responds with that famous proverb—a prophet is not accepted in his hometown.

That's the irony, isn't it? Those who were closest to Jesus, those who might have been expected to know him best, turn out to be the ones who did not accept him at all. If you were here last week, you would have heard Pastor Anker speak to the difficulty that we often face in bringing the gospel to those who are nearest to us, and he spoke to some of the reasons for that difficulty. One reason that he mentioned is that many people in Australia today simply don't think they need the gospel. They don't see themselves as captive to sin, or bound to a death that is the result of sin and under the condemnation of God's law. By contrast, Pastor Anker

pointed out how in places farther away, served by LCA international mission, people receive the gospel gratefully, longing to be released from the powers of sin, death, and the demonic, release that the gospel promises. I would add another reason for the difficulty of bringing the gospel to people. Many people may be intrigued by Jesus or the gospel, but they want Jesus or the gospel on their own terms. Oh yes, a Jesus who's always kind, who doesn't make too many demands on me, a Jesus who inspires me to be a better person—yes, maybe that's a Jesus I can get on board with. But a Jesus who calls me to radical repentance, who calls me to turn away from sin, and who calls me to hand my entire existence over to him as my Lord—well, that may be just a bit too much. Is that a reason why some people do not accept Jesus or the gospel? Perhaps that gives us some insight into why the people of Nazareth rejected him. They approached Jesus, whom they *thought* they knew well, based on their own preconceptions and presuppositions. They wanted a Jesus who would be a Jesus on *their* terms, a Jesus who would meet *their* demands. They did not approach Jesus with faith, but instead they demanded that he prove himself to them. We'll return to this point later as well.

So Jesus is the prophet who is not acceptable to his own people. To his own people, the prophet may be just a bit too close, a bit too familiar, for them to be able to hear his words as coming from beyond, as coming from God himself. Indeed, so much is this the case that Jesus compares himself to the OT prophets

Elijah and Elisha. Although Elijah and Elisha carried out much of their ministries in Israel, their greatest success lay arguably among Gentiles who lived outside of Israel. Elijah fed the starving widow of Zarephath, in pagan territory, and he brought her dead son back to life. His successor Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian of leprosy. Ironically, it was those outside the nation of Israel who showed themselves open to the words and work of God through those prophets. So Jesus is basically saying to the people of his hometown: You expect me to meet *your* demands? It's not going to happen.

Well, all this is too much for the people of Nazareth. They turn on Jesus and become angry at him, so angry, according to Luke, that they drive him out of town and take him to a cliff, with the intent of throwing him over. Jesus's word—that a prophet is not acceptable in his hometown—is quickly and dramatically being fulfilled. But Jesus slips through their fingers and goes on his way. This ending of the story is a bit mysterious—perhaps we're meant to understand that Jesus was delivered from death by God. As St. John would put it in his gospel, Jesus's hour (to die) had not yet come. Jesus lives to fight (work) another day, so to speak.

So that's the drama of the text. And we can understand why Luke begins his account of Jesus's Galilean ministry with this story. It sets the stage for so many important aspects to Jesus's ministry, doesn't it? His identity as messiah, his preaching and mighty deeds, his death, even his mysterious resurrection, and even

how the gospel will eventually go out to the nations, as Luke tells us in the book of Acts.

But where, then, might we see ourselves in this story? If we put ourselves into this story, it raises the question for us, as it did for the people of Nazareth: Who is Jesus? And what do we seek from him?

Perhaps a good way to begin is by looking at who Jesus is *not*. As I said before, if, like the people of Nazareth, we see him only as the son of Joseph, we don't understand him aright. We are reminded of chapter 6 of John's gospel. There, in Galilee, after Jesus feeds the five thousand with bread and fish, the people are very impressed, and they want Jesus to do some more miracles to prove himself, to show that he's a great prophet, maybe like Moses. But Jesus does not comply with that demand. Instead, Jesus begins to speak about himself. He says, "I am the bread of life who has come down from heaven." In other words, I am not here simply to meet your demands; I am here to give you eternal life, through faith in my words. But the people are confused and say, isn't this the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say that he has come down from heaven? Again, they thought they knew Jesus. But they didn't grasp his true identity, that he was the very Son of God. And how is it with us? How do we view Jesus? Do we view him only as a great man? No doubt he was a great man, indeed, the greatest man that ever lived. He was compassionate, he was wise, he lived an

exemplary life. But if all that—as great as all that is—if that is all we see in him, we have not yet grasped who he is, the Son of God, who came down from heaven to give us eternal life.

So the question is, not only, who is Jesus as the Son of God, but who is he for us? What do we seek from him? Here, too, this story has something important to teach us. The people of Nazareth had heard of Jesus's mighty deeds in Capernaum; now, suggests Jesus, they would ask to see the same for themselves. To put it in classic, biblical terms: they would demand a sign. If only Jesus would prove himself with mighty deeds, then they would believe him. But Jesus does not comply with that demand.

So how is it with us? What do we seek from him? Are we, too, like the people of Nazareth, tempted to seek signs, to seek proof of who Jesus is? This can be one of the most difficult parts of faith, can't it? When we want proof, when we want to see signs that assure us of God's presence and work in our lives or in the world, or that Jesus is who he says he is. Do you look for signs of God's presence and work in your life or in the world? Perhaps, like the people of Nazareth, you seek signs of Jesus's mighty power, such as in special acts of healing, whether for yourselves, or for others. Perhaps you seek signs of God's deliverance from other troubles in life. Or, in a world broken by human sinfulness, perhaps you look for a peace that, it seems, can only come from God, signs of God's presence. In all these

circumstances, and perhaps others, we may be tempted to demand that God show himself. But what if we don't see such signs? Do we give up on faith?

Well, no, we don't. Scripture constantly warns us against demanding signs from God. God does give signs of his power, and his presence, but he does so on his own terms, and for his own purposes, not ours. He is not there simply to meet our demands. But aren't there exceptions, you ask? You might think, for example, of Thomas, who demanded to see the risen Jesus before he would believe, and Jesus granted the request. But even there, Jesus does that for his own purposes. Thomas was one of the apostles, specially commissioned to preach Jesus. He was granted that special vision, along with the other apostles, so that they could first preach as witnesses to the risen Lord. And of course, that story actually serves to teach us that faith comes through hearing, rather than sight. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe"—that is, believe through the Word.

Indeed, that is the more usual pattern in Scripture. We are called to faith through hearing the Word, through the gospel. God wants us to believe in him, not because he proves himself at our demand; he calls us to believe in him because of what he has already done, the signs of his power and love that he has already given us. In the psalms, the people of Israel are rebuked for forgetting the good things that God had done for them, for not believing his Word, his promises to them, and instead putting God to the test. And even in today's text, the people of Nazareth are



presented as cravenly demanding signs rather than believing what they have already heard about Jesus.

God does do signs. God does heal. God does deliver. God does bring peace. But all this comes to us—when it comes—as a sheer gift, not at our demand. In this world fallen under sin and evil, we cannot necessarily expect all our hopes to be fulfilled. Nor do we manipulate God with our faith or our prayers. Rather, through our prayers, we ask God, like beggars, that he will give us his good gifts. And through faith, we, like beggars with open hands, receive those gifts.

But finally, let this be said, that, if we look for a sign of God's power or favor, the greatest and surest sign is the one that he already given us—the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. That is at the heart of the Word that we hear and believe. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has done a mighty act, by which he assures us and all people of his eternal favor and power. Through this message, he offers us, and all people who believe, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

So today's story is a hint of all that. In the rejection of Jesus by the people of Nazareth, we see a foreshadowing of his crucifixion. In Jesus's mysterious deliverance from their hands, we see a foreshadowing of his equally mysterious resurrection, all for our sake.

Perhaps no one has captured the significance of this story better than St.

John, who in the prologue to his gospel puts it this way (John 1:11–13):

[Jesus] came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Jesus came to his own people, and they rejected him. But it was just through that rejection—Jesus’s death—and his resurrection, that God has opened up for us salvation through faith. Just like the people of Nazareth to whom Jesus came at the very first, Jesus still comes to us, in the Word, and in the sacraments. In these gifts, in Word, in baptism, in his body and blood, he offers himself to us, inviting us to receive him through faith; and by receiving him, to receive a new birth; the forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, and salvation. God grant that to all of us, for Jesus’s sake. Amen