

Bringing Jesus to Your World

Faith or Familiarity?
Luke 4:14-30

In honor of God and His Word I invite you to stand with me as I read from Luke 4:14-30.

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ “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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ 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, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² 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. ²³ 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.’” ²⁴ “I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ 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.”

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

It’s the year A.D. 29 when Jesus begins his public ministry. The residents of Nazareth – a quiet little town concealed in the hollow of the hills of southern Galilee – are faced with a unique opportunity. They have the chance to experience the fullness of God’s blessing and healing in their lives. The very embodiment of God’s grace and love stands before them. The key question is: *Will they seize that opportunity or will they pass it by?*

When was the last time you felt that you had missed a unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? The feelings can be described as nothing short of grief, regret, and a “Why did I let that happen?” kind of feeling. It happened to me a few months ago. I shared it in a recent article of *Connections*.

No, I didn't inadvertently forfeit a vacation to Hawaii or fail to recognize that I was the winner of the 70 million dollar power ball! However, after writing that, for weeks a few asked me what I was doing with the 70 million that I had won! It was something much more important than that. *Much more important!*

For some months I had intended to visit a neighbor's father who had recently been moved to an adult care center. I knew he was in his final months, if not days, of earthly existence. On a couple of occasions we had conversed briefly, casually about the gospel. But I knew I now had the opportunity to sit leisurely at his side and share more in depth the Good News of life in Jesus. But would I take that opportunity?

Days passed – and then months. Almost inconspicuously the tyranny of the urgent pushed out the urgency of the truly important. Finally, I decided to go! It was about 2:00 pm. when I went by our neighbor's house to verify his Dad's new address. I knocked at the door with enthusiasm, filled with the good intention of following through that very afternoon. But I was met by those words I didn't want to hear: "Dad passed away this morning at 4:00 am." The opportunity was gone...*forever.*

That's a lot like what the people of Nazareth are confronted with. A unique opportunity...but they pass it by. I wonder why? Have you ever wondered why *you* pass by certain opportunities to step out in faith and experience God's blessing in unusual ways?

Just several months before, Jesus had left Nazareth, his hometown of nearly 30 years, to be baptized by John. Having received a special anointing by the Holy Spirit, he's thrust into the desert to be severely tested by the Devil. He now returns to Galileeⁱ as the text says, "in the power of the Spirit." Luke often notes how Jesus is responsive to the leading of the Spirit of God in his life. And if we want to bring Jesus to our world, we must be also. For when we're not responsive to God's Spirit, those unique opportunities of witness and growth will pass us by.

No doubt, as Jesus entered Nazareth – probably on a Friday evening – the familiar surroundings brought back a flood of boyhood memories. It's quite possible that the eventful news was already being passed from house to house: Jesus is back! He's here! I'm sure that Jesus noticed many familiar faces, neighbors among whom he had grown up and played with in the streets. It would have been about dusk when the silver trumpet sounded from the synagogue roof announcing preparation for the Sabbath.ⁱⁱ

By this time reports had reached Nazareth concerning the miracles Jesus had earlier worked in Capernaum. We can only imagine that those in the Synagogue were waiting in ecstatic expectancy to see if this "home-town-boy-turned-prophet" could "hold his own" as a teacher.

Jesus was familiar with the sequence of liturgical elements in the worship of the synagogue. First there was a "Thanksgiving" or "blessing" spoken in connection with the Jewish *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." This would be followed by a prayer and a collective "amen" by the congregation. Then would come the reading of the *Torah*: first by a priest, then a Levite, and in succession by five Israelites.

These texts were read in Hebrew and then translated into Aramaic, the common language of the people. The prophetic reading would be next and for this it was providentially requested of Jesus that he officiate. This would be followed by an exposition explaining the meaning of the passages and the service would be closed out with a benediction. This is the order we see beginning in verse 17:

¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ “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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰ 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, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

By this time, the atmosphere was electric. This home town young man, Jesus, had read a clearly Messianic passage, abruptly stopped at an inappropriate moment as if to say, “Don’t you get the point?” and then claimed he was the very fulfillment of what he had just read!

It’s interesting that, from the very outset of his ministry, Jesus outlines what his mission is all about. And that makes good sense, too. Usually, the first hundred words of any book, message, or presentation are the most important. If the writer or teacher hasn’t caught your interest, or presented an idea of where he’s going in what he has to say, then he probably won’t hold your interest. That’s what Jesus does here. From the very outset, he states his personal mission.

What is that mission? That’s an important question, because Jesus’ mission should determine our mission. First he says that he’s been appointed to “preach good news to the poor.” Jesus is quoting from Isaiah chapter 61 which foretells a coming Messiah who will bring about the many blessings of the Kingdom age spoken of in Isaiah chapter 60. The good news, then, is all that Jesus describes in the following verses: freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed.

Who are the “poor?” Without a doubt, they are those who suffer from living without the social and economic privileges that others have. And both the Old and New Testaments have a lot to say about God’s care for the poor. But they are also more than this. The “poor” are those who are open to God and humble before him. They are the “poor in spirit” that Jesus talks about. In the New Testament, James reminds us:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are *poor* in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? James 2:5-6

I wonder if these verses have something to say about whom we should be targeting in our outreach. After all, Jesus apparently had a “target audience.” They were the poor. And it just so happens that those who are poorer economically or socially are also often those who are the most open to God’s work in their lives.

These verses say something else about Jesus “target audience.” He came to “proclaim freedom for the prisoners...release the oppressed.” The background to Jesus’ words is found in the Old Testament year of Jubilee. Salvation is *release*. The year Jubilee pictured a total release from all debt and enemies. The books are wiped clean. Legal obligations are removed. Prisoners are set free.

Jesus here cites not only Isaiah 61:1-2, but combines with this Isaiah 58:6-7 –

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?ⁱⁱⁱ

What Jesus says here is demonstrated in his own life starting in verse 31 to the end of the chapter. Jesus didn’t just talk about freeing prisoners and releasing the oppressed. He did it! Jesus combines word and action. The words of the gospel are spelled out in the music of the gospel as he brings deliverance to the oppressed and needy. And if we are Christ-followers, we are called to do the same. The words of the gospel and the works of the gospel go hand in hand. Again, this is the point that James in his letter constantly reminds us of. Faith without works is dead.

You may be familiar with the fact that Jesus could have continued to read in Isaiah 61, citing the words “to proclaim... the day of vengeance of our God.” But he doesn’t. He ends his reading with those words, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” In abruptly stopping at that inopportune place in the passage, Jesus underscores the truth that you and I live today in the age of God’s favor. Heaven smiles on us. A time of severe judgment is coming. It will not delay. But today is the day of God’s favor.

This is one of the greatest motivations that you and I have to bring Jesus to our world...and to do it *now*. The time may well be short. God is patient, not willing that any should perish. And God wants to show his favor to those around us, but do it through you and me.

The discourse by the teacher was usually followed by a time of silence in the synagogue, giving all time to reflect on what was just read. This was especially appropriate on this occasion. They needed time to process the words of Jesus. But the silence was soon broken by a mixed response.

²² 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. ²³ 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.”

It has often been said that “Familiarity breeds contempt.” There’s probably no more an accurate description of these verses than that. Verse 22 expresses the people’s familiarity with the “son of Joseph” who is making such radical Messianic claims. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they ask. “How can the one who played in our streets for so many years now stand up and make such presumptuous claims?”

The contemporary maxim – “familiarity breeds contempt” – is grounded in the moorings of 1st Century terminology. Jesus says, “No prophet is welcome in his hometown.” Did you know that it’s possible to be so *familiar* with Jesus that you no longer really have *faith* in Jesus? Though there are certainly many advantages and privileges of growing up in a Christian family or being a Christian for many years, one of the subtle dangers is familiarity that can breed contempt. You become to “accustomed” to Christ, so “accustomed” to the Bible, so “accustomed” to church ... that you lose the vibrancy, the freshness, the initial faith. Familiarity, apart from faith, can result in contempt.

The contempt, conceived in the hearts of these people, is now perceived by Jesus. Under the surface of their awe and amazement he sees their cold hearts of rejection and unbelief, and says, “No doubt you will quote this proverb to me, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’” In other words: “You aspire to Messiahship by claiming a divine anointing! Prove it! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.”

Bottom line, the people want Jesus to “show his stuff.” But there may be another more subtle thought here. It seems the people ironically believe that Jesus himself is “sick.” Why else would he make such stupendous claims? He needs to first heal himself, and then he’ll be fit to heal others.

The problem, however, is not with Jesus, but with the people’s lack of faith. It’s this point that Jesus drives home in no uncertain terms in the following verses:

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

In referring to the time of Elijah and Elisha, Jesus is comparing the present situation to one of the most apostate moment in the history of Israel. The situation in Israel at this time was awful. It’s the ninth century B.C. and Ahab is ruling along with his wretched wife, Jezebel. 1 Kings 16:30 says that “Ahab ... did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.”

Israel as this time had all they needed to experience God full blessing in their lives. They had his promises and they had his prophets. But partly due to Jezebel’s insipient, evil influence, they swapped Yahweh for Baal. The people wouldn’t even listen to Elijah, God’s prophet. And a result, God sends a famine on the land of Israel.

Not welcome in his own country, God sends Elijah to a lowly Gentile widow in Zarephath. By the way, have you ever noticed how God often works in unexpected ways and places. Elijah would have been surprised to hear that his most effective ministry would be among a widowed Gentile. This wasn’t part of his “target audience” to start with. I sometimes wonder, too, what God is saying to Central Bible Church. He sometimes leads along what the prophet Isaiah calls “unfamiliar paths” (Isaiah 42:16). These are “paths” that we might not have chosen left to ourselves. They may appear risky, dangerous and full of obstacles and challenges. But they are nevertheless the paths that will lead to God’s fullest blessing in our lives and in the lives of others. We sometimes hold back from new, unexpected opportunities that God places before us.

Like the early church in Acts, which had to be convinced that God was actually wanting them to reach out to Gentiles. We must allow ourselves to be led by God's Spirit as we reach out in sometimes unexpected ways to those around us.

Back to Elijah and this widow and her son. There she is, gathering sticks to prepare one last meal before she and her son would die due to the famine. And here comes Elijah, this seemingly cocky prophet seeking room and board from one so poverty-stricken. First, he asks for water, and then for bread. But the believing widow, recognizing Elijah as a prophet of the God of Israel...acted in obedient faith. 1 Kings 17 says, "She went and did according to the Word of the Lord, and she and he and her household ate for many days."

Faith is that which alone enables us to take hold of the display of God's grace and blessing in our lives. And many opportunities that God gives us are passed by due to lack of faith on our part. I hope this point is coming across. For those in Nazareth it was, loud and clear.

Jesus continues in verse 27:

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."

Again, Jesus uses an historical illustration and one all too well known to his hearers. Naaman was a high officer in feudal service to Ben-Hadad, King of Syria. 2 Kings 5:1 describes Naaman as "highly respected" and "a valiant warrior." There was only one problem. He was a leper.

Hearing of the opportunity to be healed by a prophet of Israel, he came to Elisha. With royal pomp and ceremony, he came and stood at Elisha's door. He probably thought to himself: "Surely this Elisha, recognizing me as a superior, will come out, call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the place and cure me!"

However, Elisha simply sends a messenger to him, saying "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times." If you could diagnose with an emotional thermometer both Naaman and those listening to Jesus on this occasion, it would read for both, "Danger, hot-headed!" Why? Because both Elisha and Jesus are surfacing a problem in their hearers – the problem of unbelief fueled by pride.

But then Naaman parts paths with the Jews of Jesus' home town. Naaman, as we know, humbles himself and goes, dips in the dirty Jordan River seven times and is healed. And it's this very fact that gives "bite" to Jesus' illustration.

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

In contrast to Naaman, those in Nazareth rise up in anger and attempt to murder Jesus by throwing him off a cliff. For them, mere intellectual familiarity bred contempt, and this contempt ultimately resulted in rejection of the very one who could heal their hearts and forgive their sin.

What about you? Jesus stands among us today very much like he stood among those in his own home town of Nazareth. He offers us, as them, freedom, release, sight, and grace. Think with me. In what specific area of your life do you need God's touch like that? Where does freedom need to replace bondage? Where does sight need to replace blindness? Where does God's grace need to replace obligation and lift a burden? Mere familiarity with Jesus can often block authentic faith in Jesus. And faith is the first step in experiencing God's favor in our life.

As for that opportunity that I missed – well, I'm glad that God, in his grace, turned it into another opportunity that I took. Our neighbors later asked me to speak at the small memorial service held in their home. Few of the some forty people present have any on-going contact with the gospel or a local church. As I shared Jesus' words from John 14 – His promise of a prepared place for prepared people – I was reminded once again of the urgency of the *truly* important. And what is *truly* important? Sharing the love, life and truth of Jesus Christ with those around us.

ⁱ Jesus' ministry in Galilee was foundational for establishing a base of disciples. Acts 1:21-22 makes this clear: "Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

ⁱⁱ Jesus' popularity is growing. In fact, the word "news" in verse 14 is the word from which we get our word "fame." It speaks of the idea of news passing through the public. Of course, in that day, it spoke of news spreading by word of mouth, not so much in written form.

ⁱⁱⁱ This passage has become a key text for what has become known as "liberation theology." In its more radical forms, this perspective teaches that Jesus, in siding with the poor and prisoners, urges us to take revolutionary measures to free the poor and oppressed from political structures that hold them in their grasp. Some see here a strong political message in Jesus' words.