

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Into the Fire: Worn-Out Welcome”

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He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Luke 4:23-30

We’ve spent the past four weeks going bit by bit through Luke chapter 4 during this season of Lent. As we get closer to Holy Week when we remember Christ’s passion and crucifixion, it’s telling that so much of what led Jesus to the cross we find seeds of in this passage at the start of his ministry. We began this series “Into the Fire” with Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. Luke seems to make a point to emphasize that it was *by the Spirit* that Jesus was led into that time of trial and temptation—that’s where the series title comes from, that saying “out of the frying pan and into the fire,” which of course begs the question, why would the Spirit lead him into temptation? Isn’t that what we pray that God wouldn’t do when we pray the Lord’s Prayer? Lead us *not into temptation*? So we looked at each temptation closely, and Jesus rejects them all and returns to Galilee where he begins his public ministry.

You’d think at that point that Jesus would deserve a break, that he’d deserve a bit of a breather, or maybe even a bit of good will. And in some respects, that’s exactly what he gets. He becomes incredibly popular. Word about him spreads throughout the region, and then he comes to his hometown of Nazareth. We left off last week with Jesus teaching in the synagogue, having read from Isaiah 61, saying “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” and everyone loved him for it. And then he made a huge mistake: he kept talking. Let’s go to God’s Word, starting in v. 23, reading through v. 30.

[Read passage.]

Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Have you ever known anyone who couldn’t take “yes” for an answer? Or someone who couldn’t quit while ahead? Someone with a knack for snatching a “no” from the jaws of “yes” simply by not knowing when to stop talking? I know I can think of a few people like that. It’s kind of frustrating to see them in action, but then

also a bit entertaining. In whatever it is they're talking about—could be a business deal or interaction with a colleague or even just a casual conversation—they've got someone on board with them. All the signals are there. The head's nodding. The eyes are focused. The arms are open.

But then like clockwork, that certain someone keeps talking, and soon the other person's head starts getting a slight furrow in the brow, the eyes start darting around, and the arms start to cross in front of their chest. And by the end of the conversation, they leave not on the same page, not on the same terms, or not having made some kind of agreement, and it's all because that certain someone didn't know when to stop talking.

Got to admit, I felt a bit of that same kind of frustration reading about how Jesus handled this encounter in his hometown of Nazareth. Last week, he was riding high. Everyone loved him. He had come back home with a lot of wind at his back, a bit of celebrity following him around. Then he wows the crowd with a powerful passage from Isaiah 61 that he read. And then he really knocked their socks off when he said that that same passage, the one that proclaimed good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed and the year of the Lord's favor, had been fulfilled in their hearing. In other words, he's saying that there would be no more waiting for all that to take place. The time of the Lord's favor, the time for that good news and freedom for the downtrodden, was now!

And they loved it! They ate it up.

And then Jesus kept talking.

Honestly there shouldn't have been all that much suspense. We just read half the story last week and cut it off in v. 22, but if you looked in your Bibles, you probably saw a heading saying something like "Rejection at Nazareth," which probably gave away the ending. But if we're just hearing this, or if we're just reading this for the first time, we've got to be thinking that Jesus is doing great, right? And then he goes and does something absolutely stupefying.

Seemingly unprovoked, Jesus launches into what was likely heard as a series of presumptuous insults, all directed at people that he likely knew personally. He said, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" It appears that Jesus suspects that this home crowd is just there to see if he'd perform some miracle like he had done elsewhere. You hear that and you might think, "Okay. Seems a bit harsh in response to the crowd's eagerness."

Then he says, "Truly I tell you; no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." You hear that and you might think, "Not sure where this is coming from. I mean, were they all not just speaking well of him? Seems like they were accepting him to me."

Then he says, "But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman and Syrian." You hear that and you might think, "Elijah what? Zarephath? Where the heck did that come from?"

Whatever it meant, it really ticked them off. Not just grumbling in the back of the synagogue or on the way out the door, but rage at Jesus, so much so that they take him, drive him out of town, and try to throw him off a cliff to kill him. You might get whiplash reading this, because over the span of just six verses, the crowd goes from loving him, speaking well of him, being amazed at what he's saying, at how gracious his words are, all the way to trying to kill him.

What happened in between? Jesus kept talking.

I'm trying to imagine how he could have screwed up more. I mean just in terms of offering a sermon—and that's pretty much what he's doing; he read Scripture, then he's interpreting it—you really have to try hard to lose a crowd that quickly.

Think of it this way. Let's say I'm preaching, and the sermon's going really well, and you're amazed at what I'm saying. (I know, I know, this is purely theoretical.) What would I have to say that over the course of minute, which is about how much time it took Jesus to say what he said, to enrage you, to make you want to lash out at me, drive me out?

On the cutting room floor of this sermon was the brilliant idea I had of trying out a list of things that might be absolutely inflammatory, but I'm afraid we just don't have time, which is too bad. Could've been funny, for me at least. But you get the point. It's not just that the people were already simmering with anger and then Jesus added the straw that broke the camel's back. It's that they went all the way from elation to rage in the course of the minute, and honestly when we read what Jesus said, it doesn't seem *that* bad, right?

What did Jesus mean by all that Elijah and Elisha talk anyway? Why did that set them off?

The story about Elijah we read a little bit ago, about his going to a widow. Not just any widow, Jesus points out, but to a widow in a town called Zarephath, and the main thing to know about Zarephath is that it isn't in Israel. The story about Elisha says something similar. He heals a man of leprosy named Naaman, and the main thing to know about Naaman is that he was the commander of a foreign army, that is, not an Israelite. The common thread in both stories, and it seems the point Jesus is making is that both of these prophets, Elijah and Elisha, were sent to foreigners, outsiders, outside of who were deemed to be the chosen people of God.

And that really touched a nerve it seems. Now it's starting to make a bit more sense. Everything Jesus had said earlier, quoting from Isaiah 61, talking about good news for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, the year of the Lord's favor, they thought he was referring to them. That is, they thought he was referring *just* to them, that this favor, this restoration, this jubilee was coming *just* for them. After all, if Jesus was the Messiah, why wouldn't they think he'd be coming *just* for them, God's chosen people?

Wouldn't that have been the easy thing for Jesus to do? Even if they were wrong, just let them go ahead and keep thinking it. No need to poke the hornet's nest. No need to upset people. Wouldn't it have been easier just to offer a word of comfort here and then move on to his real purpose, his ministry of giving sight to the blind, good news to the poor, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor without discrimination whether you're Jew or Gentile?

No doubt it would have been easier. But as we saw last week, Jesus isn't preaching to the choir. He isn't teaching to win a popularity contest. He preaches good news, to be sure, but how offensive can good news be to our ears when we hear that it's meant for someone else, someone we think is undeserving, someone we think doesn't belong?

How would you hear that? Think of the person or group of people you would have the hardest time accepting, the hardest time including, the hardest time considering as just as much made in the image of God and loved by God just as much as you and sought by God for inclusion into his covenant family. Think of that person, or that group of people, and now imagine Jesus coming here today, proclaiming good news of grace and salvation, but then telling you, it's for them.

That's the message Jesus came to spread. That's the ministry Jesus came to do. That's what the people of Nazareth heard, and they tried to kill him for it. He could have avoided it, plenty of reasons and temptations otherwise, but he didn't. He went right into it. Led by the Spirit, went from trials and temptations in the wilderness straight into a ministry that was filled with hardship too. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, as it were.

That same road had one destination. He was heading toward the cross. It's hard not to hear the echoes of this rejection of Nazareth, of the crowd's rage so quickly on the heels of their praise, as we come closer to Holy Week, closer to another crowd singing Jesus's praises one day, then calling for his death a few days later.

And why? Why would he do this? Why would he go down this road? Well, he told us. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He could have had a life of ease and comfort, of bread and authority and fame and popularity. But that's not why he came. As Luke tells us at the end of this passage, he goes on his way. He would not be deterred.

If we follow him, truly follow him, we may face similar trials, because the good news of the sort Jesus preaches always faces resistance. May we not be deterred either.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.