

Expect Nothing; Get Nothing
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Luke 4:14 through Luke 4:30 (NRSV)

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"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."

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³He 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.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵But 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; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (NRSV)

Introduction and Comments:

In reading our lectionary text for today, I was immediately struck by the frustrated expectations of the people in Jesus' hometown.

Speaking of frustrated expectations, did you hear about the ecology-minded pastor, who asked that the more sanitary hot-air hand dryers be installed in all the restrooms at the church, but after two weeks he had them removed.

When asked why he was removing the new hand dryers, he confessed that they worked fine but when he went into the restroom the other day he saw a sign on one of the new hand dryers that read:

"For a sample of this week's sermon, push the button."

Sermon:

In our scriptures this morning, I find the idea that the people in Jesus' hometown may have expected to profit in some way from Jesus' fame and power a bit disconcerting. However, this is not unlike some of our modern towns that try to attract tourists based upon the fame of a hometown boy or girl or the infamy of some hometown miscreant. Just as in the biblical setting, cities, towns, and villages had reputations or honor standings that was reflective of its people as well as reflected on its people.

My hometown, Clarksdale, MS, bills itself as the "Home of the Blues" and boasts a number of famous blues singers such as Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith, W.C. Handy, Sonny Boy Williamson, Son House, Sam Cooke, John Lee Hooker, Ike Turner, and many more. Not to mention the literary giant, Tennessee Williams, along with such football notables as Charlie Conerly, Art Davis, and Bobby Franklin.

After Jesus' wilderness temptations, being full of the Holy Spirit, he had gone about the countryside of Galilee healing people and teaching in synagogues. I imagine that the folks in Nazareth were a little peeved that Jesus hadn't started his ministry in Nazareth; but, he was home now. They were looking forward to basking not only in his reflected glory and the prestige of having such a notable prophet from their town, but more direct and personal blessings. Who knows, maybe Jesus would build a big healing and spiritual retreat center in town - great for community economic development. If he built it, people would come and everyone in Nazareth would bask in the reflected honor of such a place and its founder, not to mention the financial benefits.

Jesus, as a devout Jew, went to the synagogue or community centers each Sabbath to study, listen to, and discuss the Torah. With his being somewhat of a local celebrity in our text, he was asked to read or recite from what many scholars believe were scheduled selections from the prophets (Nevi'im) not unlike our lectionary schedules. I say recite because most people from Jesus' neck of the woods at the time, contrary to Luke's understandings, were illiterate.

In general, people were impressed with Jesus and what he said. However, others were a bit put off. I remind us that in Jesus' peasant society all life's resources were limited, including honor. Since Jesus had gone off and acquired an honor standing beyond the merits of his birth by unselfishly doing good for others, his coming home had upset the balance of honor in the community and, by implication, people's sense of self-worth and meaning not to mention the community leadership. Thus, people would have been suspicious of Jesus and resentful, as we see in our texts.

So, who does this the son of Joseph, a common tradesman, think he is? How dare he speak as if he has great authority and insight, especially to us - his hometown folk? As my dad once told me when I shared a more informed view on something scriptural, "Boy, don't get bigger than yo' raisin, 'cause we know who you are and where you come from." In short, don't get uppity.

Now, as much as the community mothers and fathers knew Jesus, Jesus also knew them. He knew about their families and their strengths and weakness. He also knew that in a small, rural community like Nazareth that people's worldviews and openness to change were nil and next to none. In a small, peasant community, consistency, regularity, and everyone in his or her place doing only what was expected of them was sacred and fixed, and they didn't put up with people tampering with the order of things.

Initially, Jesus' presence boded well for the people of Nazareth. However, Luke understood that this new thing that God was doing in Jesus would not be contained by historical, geographical, and ethnic boundaries or regional honor paradigms.

There are two ways in which we may interpret Jesus' response to his audience. One is: Jesus knew the community's narrow mindedness and resistance to change; therefore, what he said is not out of context or without provocation.

In other words, growing up in Nazareth, Jesus had seen what had happened to people who had stepped out of their place. I think he looked at the congregation and thought, "I know you people well enough to know what you are thinking and mumbling about. You're thinking kind-begets-kind, like father-like-son; so, how dare this son of Joseph, a common tradesman, make such grandiose and pretentious claims for himself?"

A second interpretation of the old proverb concerning prophets could be that prophets were unable to do many great works in their own hometowns because of the community's familiarity with the prophet, which lowered expectations. In other words, we don't expect much of anyone from where we come from or from our socio-economic class.

What is doubly important about these insights are that in Luke's Gospel people's expectations were critical to their receiving healing and the power of the Gospel. These folks in Nazareth obviously never expected much of themselves or for that matter of God beyond their traditional, cultural understandings. So, take your pick of interpretations. I think it may be a mixture of both.

The people of Jesus' hometown heard him say in his new role as a prophet that they were a part of a history-making event. They heard in his words that God was again delivering on divine promises made by one of the later prophets of Isaiah. God was going to deliver God's people, the Israelites, and reestablish them to a former place of honor and prosperity as a righteous, honorable, and self-determining nation among the nations.

To this point, the prophet known as Third Isaiah said:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed and to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners; (Isaiah 61:1)

The phrasing to proclaim release comes from Lev. 25.10, which discusses Israelite farmers who lost their land and were forced into indentured servitude. Leviticus ruled that they could leave their servitude and regain their land every fifty years - a Jubilee Year. The prophet of these Isaiah passages (Deutero-Isaiah) applied this concept to the nation [of Israel] as a whole: in 586 [BCE] Judah lost its land and was forced to live [in exile] elsewhere. Fifty years later, its period of service ended when the Edict of Cyrus allowed them to leave Babylonia and to regain their ancestral land.¹ Thus, those oppressed by the powers that be, in debt, or in prison for their debts, are to be set free in the Jubilee year.

However, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus like the prophet of Isaiah took this affirmation of God's blessing and coming restoration to a level well beyond the expectations of his fellow townspeople. He claimed to be the latest prophetic voice for these scriptures, addressing his people's period of domination and alienation, with words of a coming Jubilee blessing. God was going to bless and restore the poor, those who had lost their honor and their means of self-determination. All those people, who were held captive by socio-economic, religious, and demonic forces, would be set free and empowered by the Good News of God in a universal period of Jubilee in the kingdom of God on earth.

Luke highlights this more universal and inclusive character of the coming kingdom by having Jesus remind the people that there was a time when God, in response to Israel's misbehavior,

¹ The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition (p. 900). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

caused a great drought. In those days, Elijah went to a widow of Sidon by God's orders to restore her dead son, when Israel and her sons and daughters were dying and in need. Israel had many lepers in need of healing yet Elisha, who had a double portion of Elijah's spirit, healed only a Syrian general and enemy of Israel.

The people of Nazareth, like a lot of their contemporaries as well as many people today, hear these scriptures of Isaiah as exclusive promises of God for them and them alone. However, in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus references these Isaiah passages, he was well aware of the prophets' more universal and inclusive perspectives of God's intent. God had called the descendants of Abraham not to form an exclusive group for just their benefit alone but as the means and mediums for blessing all the nations.

When the people understood these implications, they turned against Jesus, labeling him a deviant, a heretic. Their own expectations, understandings, and needs blinded them to the fact that God had sent from among them, to them, a mighty prophet and healer. In the end, because of their low expectations and familiarity with one of their own, they were unable to see and understand the radical and inclusive nature of what Jesus proclaimed as the word of God. They drove him out of the synagogue, out of the city, and would have killed him for his audacity, but somehow, he gave them the slip.

I was raised in a religious atmosphere, not unlike that in Nazareth. It was a community thought-world dominated by people's ignorance, fears, low expectations, economic hardships, and severe social and cultural limitations. What I learned from this in later years was that those people, who would exclude others from the joy of God's grace, end up like the people of Nazareth, diminishing their own capacity to participate in and enjoy God's grace and its freedom. We must never set limits on how God will do God's redemptive, restorative, and healing work to our expectations or understandings.

So, Jesus could not do many good works in his hometown because the townspeople were not open to him; they didn't expect great things and they were not disappointed. How sad. I imagine there were people in Nazareth who needed healing and restoration in body, mind, and social standing. How sad that so many were blinded by their prejudices, narrow-mindedness, and ethnic arrogance and could not see and understand God's unfettered grace.

What many of the people in Nazareth, I imagine, had longed for, prayed for, was God's deliverance from the unfairness of their plight in life at the coming of the Messiah. And, there he was, standing right in front of them. He was offering them a new, life-giving way of understanding God's relationship to them and their relationships to others. Ways that would set them free from certain culturally oppressive understandings and attitudes, which bound them body, mind, and soul, restricting their joy in God and others. Yet, there are none so blind who refuse to see.

The central theme of Jesus' life and ministry was the Kingdom of God and it having come near in his message. The Kingdom of God is that place and time where the Caesars of this world with all their systemic oppression and injustice will not rule. The Kingdom of God is that era on earth when people will be free from political, economic, social, and religious oppression and allowed to seek their own way within the will and ways of God. In essences, the Kingdom of God will be a time when the human spirit will be set free from compliances and conformities that are not of God.

In closing, as I rethink our text, I guess the old saying, "Expect nothing, get nothing" is true for some people. But, this doesn't have to be the case for those in Christ. We can expect the fullness of God's kingdom to some relative degree now in our faith communities as we wait for its fullness in the future. I say this with an understanding that as Christians, we must be open to see the kingdom and its ways and willing to receive it even when its reality deviates from our expectations.

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