

A sermon preached on Luke 4:21-31

American author Thomas Wolfe was right, at least as far as prophets are concerned – you can't go home again. Jesus discovered this to be the case early in his ministry – though surely he must have had an inkling given the treatment some of his predecessors had received in their hometowns. Amos had been run out of town, Isaiah teased and chided, and Jeremiah had been twice tried for blasphemy and sedition.

Jesus' return to his hometown at the beginning of his public ministry started off well enough. He wowed them with his reading of Scripture from Isaiah – a passage that was crucial for many first century Palestinians as a key to understanding that time when God's promises would be fulfilled and the blessings proclaimed in Hebrew Scripture would befall God's faithful. When Jesus announced at the end of his reading "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your ears," – a phrase that appears only here in the Bible – a shock wave must have gone through the congregation. This is it. The herald is here. This is the year we get rid of these damned Romans.

Of course there seems to have been some puzzlement over the identity of the messenger. "Isn't that Joe's boy?" They clearly liked the words about God's grace, which they, of course, assumed applied to them. They liked what they heard him say about today being the day, but they weren't so

sure of him, a local boy. They had expected something a little more unusual, a heavenly figure perhaps. All in all, however, the congregation seemed pleased. Jesus was off to a good start.

It all changed so quickly and so dramatically that we are left wondering what could possibly have happened. What did Jesus do, what did he say to turn an enthusiastic congregation into an angry mob out for blood? Luke gives us a hint when he has Jesus begin his sermon with the ancient proverb “No prophet is acceptable in his own country.”

Just as R.C. Collingwood has said of the artist, the prophet “tells his or her audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts.... As spokesperson of the community, the secrets the prophet must utter are theirs...(for) no community altogether knows its own heart...” Especially is it ignorant of the worst disease of the human mind, says Collingwood, the corruption of consciousness.

And that is just what Jesus did in his sermon. He spoke the secrets of his audience’s hearts. He confronted them with their own arrogance and self-righteousness. His audience was sure that they were to be the recipients of God’s blessings, that it would be their fortunes that would be reversed with the appearance of God’s Anointed One; and that it would be their enemies, those with whom they disagreed, who would reap God’s judgment.

In other words, they believed they had the market on God. But true to his prophetic calling, Jesus turns that idea on its head and he does it by preaching a sermon on Isaiah using two biblical stories.

*Okay, you've heard the words of the prophet Isaiah. And you think you know what it means. But I'm here to tell you that you don't know what it means if you think that you are the exclusive recipients of God's reign. I know, you want me to offer you some of those blessings right now, just like you've heard I've done in Capernaum. "After all," you're saying to yourselves, "these blessings are supposed to be for us. We're God's people, we've done what God has asked, we're living like God wants us to live. Now give us what we've been waiting for, what we deserve."*

*Sorry folks, it doesn't work that way. Think about it. You remember Elijah and Elisha. There were plenty of widows in Israel during the famine back in Elijah's day. But did God send Elijah to one of them? No God did not. God sent Elijah to a widow over in Sidon. And Elisha, don't you think there were plenty of lepers in Israel during his day. Of course there were. But was he sent to one of them. No. It was Naaman the Syrian who was cleansed by him. So don't think you've got the market on God, because the minute you do you're in trouble. God doesn't work at our pleasure or for whom we think God should work. God isn't our private possession, and we*

*don't have a corner on God's truth. That's what the prophets have been trying to tell you, that's what I'm here to tell you, and that's why none of us are acceptable to you because you don't want to hear it. You don't want anyone reminding you that you aren't any better than anyone else and you don't have a corner on God or God's truth. And you sure don't want anyone using your own Scriptures to point it out.*

This is tough stuff. It is stark reminder that scripture confronts and challenges as well as comforts and consoles.

Right now it would be very easy, and indeed very tempting, to identify with Jesus in this reading, rather than his audience. After all we are followers of Jesus. We've moved beyond the congregation at Nazareth. We aren't a closed group. We don't exclude people. We even accept the validity of other religious traditions. It would be so easy to identify with Jesus, rather than his audience, but that would be the corruption of our consciousness. For to do so would be to assume that we are beyond the need for the prophetic word; that we are beyond the need to be challenged by Jesus' assertion that God is not owned by any one person or any one group. To do so would be to assume that we have arrived and that we have nothing more to learn about God, especially from anyone whose views are contrary to our own.

Let's face it, deep down inside don't we believe that our interpretation of things is the best? Don't we believe that we have more of a handle on what God was up to in Jesus than all those fundamentalists and evangelicals? Don't we really believe that on that great getting'-up morning, or, if you prefer, "in the final analysis," our view of God and reality will be vindicated? And don't we really believe that we are the in-group that people will want to be part of if we can just get them in the door of this beautiful building and they can see what friendly people we are and what wonderful music we have? And of course they ought to join us because we do have what they really need.

I have to confess, guilty as charged. Deep down there is a big part of me that believes all of those things. Why else would I be here? And those things are not necessarily wrong. But it is also true, - and this is what the prophetic word is all about, - that our rightness doesn't necessarily make those with whom we disagree wrong. We don't have the corner on rightness or righteousness, and they don't have the corner on wrongness. All of us, all of our assumptions, be they liberal or conservative, progressive or evangelical, Hindu or Christian, Jewish or Muslim, be they religious or secular, "fall under the judgment," of God being God, rather than our

version of God. And because of this, we had better be prepared for the fact that God will surprise us in ways that might be very uncomfortable for us.

I wonder what surprises God has in store for us in this congregation, in this community? I wonder what challenges to our understanding of God and our mission lay ahead. If we are open to the presence of God in our midst, if we are open to “the other”, then the future will surely reveal both the blessings and the challenges that come with being a vital, growing, dynamic fellowship. May we welcome both.