

## 2019 02 03 – The Problem with Prophets

### Luke 4:21-30

When I lived in Ontario one place I enjoyed visiting was Canada's Wonderland just north of Toronto. Wonderland is a theme park full of rides and attractions. When I used to go there, I always rode the rollercoasters. How many of you have ridden on a rollercoaster? (*wait for response*) I used to love rollercoasters and the one I loved the best was the Great Canadian Minebuster. The Minebuster is the one of longest wooden roller coasters in Canada and it is full of side-winding turns, stomach lifting humps and breathtaking drops. But what it doesn't do is turn you upside down. I was never interested in those newer rollercoasters that included a spot you where ended up with your feet in the air and your head to the ground. I didn't think my stomach could take it. Being turned upside down may be fun for kids, but for most adults it is a frightening and an uncomfortable experience.

Just ask the people in that synagogue in Nazareth. Last week we talked about Jesus coming home to the place where he grew up and then going to the synagogue on the Sabbath and being offered the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read. We noted that the passage Jesus chose was filled with a message of hope for a people who were poor and oppressed. Jesus read,

The spirit of our God is upon me:

because the Most High has anointed me

to bring Good News to those who are poor.

God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held captive,

recovery of sight to those who are blind,  
and release to those in prison –  
to proclaim the year of our God's favour.

When Jesus finished reading, the people in the synagogue waited in eager anticipation for what he was going to say next. Jesus slowly rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down to teach. It was then that he delivered his punchline. Jesus said, "Today, in your hearing, this scripture passage is fulfilled."

And today's reading begins with this line. "Today, in your hearing, this scripture passage is fulfilled." What great news for the people of Nazareth. They were living under the rule of the Roman emperor and struggling with high taxes and unbearable debts. The Romans would even come and seize their ancestral land or their belongings. The people in that synagogue knew that the good news was meant for them. They knew that they were Israelites, the chosen people of God. They knew that Jesus had been sent to free them from Roman rule and to give them back their tribal land. They were thrilled when Jesus said, "Today, in your hearing, this scripture passage is fulfilled."

The Gospel of Luke tells us that, "All who were present spoke favorably of him; they marvelled at the eloquence of the words on Jesus' lips. They said, "Surely this isn't Mary and Joseph's son!" It was hard to believe that their Messiah could come from their own small village! What excitement, what joy, and what anticipation they felt. They couldn't wait to hear what Jesus would say next!

But Jesus's words were not what they expected. He told them, "Well you've probably heard of the miracles that I performed in Capernaum a couple of weeks ago and, no doubt, you expect me to come here and do the same. But the truth is, prophets never gain acceptance in their hometown."

You can imagine the smiles disappearing from the faces in front of Jesus and the brows starting to furrow as the people in the synagogue struggled to understand what Jesus was saying. Jesus could, no doubt, see that the people were confused by his words so he gave them examples from their own Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus said, "You remember the great prophet Elijah. Well when there was a long drought and a horrible famine in Israel, Elijah didn't help the widows of Israel, instead he went to Zarephath, near Sidon and helped a desperate widow there. And then there was the prophet Elisha. Even though many in Israel suffered with leprosy, not one of them was cured. It was Naaman, the Syrian that Elisha healed." Jesus was making it very clear that like the Hebrew prophets before him, his good news was not just for the Hebrew people. Jesus wanted his listeners to know that he had been anointed to bring good news to everyone, even the Gentiles, the pagans, the outsiders. Jesus' ministry was not going to focus just on his own people, definitely not on his family and friends.

This was mind-blowing news to the people of Nazareth. According to today's passage, "the whole audience in the synagogue was filled with indignation." Now you should know that other translations use much stronger language than "indignation." They suggest that the crowd was filled with "anger," "rage," "fury," or even "wrath." The people of Nazareth were enraged. We know they were

enraged because they got up and they forced Jesus first out of synagogues and then out of town, leading him to the top of the hill on which the village was built. The scriptures tell us that they intended to throw Jesus over the edge. But, luckily, Jesus was able to slip through the crowd and walk away.

That was a crazy mob on that hill. It's a little scary to think that one sermon could create that kind of a reaction. What was it that made the people of Nazareth so angry? I'm sure they felt slighted or even rejected by one of their own. They were probably disappointed and let down. But it was more than that. Jesus' news had literally turned their world upside down and it was a very uncomfortable place to be.

From infancy they had been taught that their God was the God of the Israelites, that they were God's chosen people, and that God was going to send a Messiah to free them from oppression. They had lived devout lives: carefully following the laws of the Torah, keeping their Sabbath holy, making sure that God's house was the best building in town, and going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They expected their just reward. And here was Jesus telling them that his good news was not just for them. Was it possible that their one God was the God of everyone? Was it possible that they weren't the "chosen people" after all? Suddenly their feet were in the air and their heads were on the ground because this prophet from God, this man from their hometown, had turned their understanding upside down.

Throughout history prophets have messed with people's worldviews. On January 21<sup>st</sup>, the United States celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day. This holiday celebrates the birthday of a modern-day prophet whose non-violent campaign for civil rights was so controversial that he was assassinated in 1968. Today, many people still refuse to let Martin Luther King Jr's vision of God's kingdom turn their White Supremacist world-view upside-down.

How would you feel if a preacher did that to you? How would you feel if a preacher tried to suggest that the world, or God or God's church didn't turn around you? How would you feel if a preacher said, "You know what... this church that you belong to, this building that you've cared for, this minister that you pay... they are not here just for you... they are here for everyone. In fact, the resources of this church should be focussing more on the people outside these doors than they do on the people inside. This church is God's and its mission is God's mission and God's love is here for everyone." Would that sermon be enough to cause indignation? Would that sermon be enough to turn your world upside down?

The problem with a God of unconditional love is that love goes far beyond the borders of any church or synagogue. The problem with preachers is sometimes they say things that push us out of our comfort zones.. The problem with God's prophets is that sometimes they say things that will turn your world upside down.