

Isn't This Joseph's Son?
Luke 4:21-30
Communion

Luke 4:21-30

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.

The Sermon

You come to worship like any other sabbath day, only this time, the visitor you have been expecting has arrived.

Rumors have been swirling about him: He's brilliantly eloquent. He's authoritative. He's mesmerizing.

It's hard to know what to believe and what are just the exaggerations of people like you and me, who want to believe that something like redemption is not only possible, but nearer now than we had had any reason to expect.

And here this charismatic, mysterious person is, this sabbath, back in his hometown synagogue, which happens to be yours.

What does he look like?

He's a walker; he's out under the sun a lot, and exposed to the elements.

He is in no way an old man, but he's not a teenager, either. You don't want to look like you're staring, but while he's looking at something or somebody else, look at him closely.

What do you see in the lines on his face?

What does his hair look like?

What do his hands look like? His feet?

And if you can get just a little closer, what about the eyes?

Did you know that was in the wilderness recently, for 40 days?

There was a great fast, like a vision quest for a Lakota. Unbelievable, unimaginable things happened out there. Did you know that he has just recently been in direct conversation with the figure who seems to have been the same one who got Job in trouble in that poetic work from centuries ago—*ha-Satan*, the Tempter?

The man standing in our synagogue right in front of us has faced *ha-Satan* in the wilderness, and his soul was on the line, and he survived the temptations and “won” the right to carry on with what he meant to do.

What do the eyes of somebody look like who has faced down the devil after 40 starving days in the wild?

Just before that, he had gone to be baptized by John the Baptizer, whose message was electrifying the whole region. Jesus was with John, his cousin, and he went under the water like all the rest.

And they say something astounding happened, but it’s not entirely clear what.

Since that time, and the trial in the desert scrub, he’s been going around to the synagogues, bringing his own message and his own astonishing self.

And the word started going around the synagogue: wait a second; isn’t this Joseph’s son? We know this guy.

You know, we had a sense that the kid could talk and think and everything—he knew his religion pretty well. But we don’t know him as some redeemer.

We saw him growing up, and knew him in the stages when kids are supposed to cause trouble and act goofy. He does not come to us as one unknown. We know this kid. Or we know his Mom and Dad anyway. Lovely people, but, I mean, are they any better than any of the rest of us?

We told him he sounded wonderful when he spoke. And in return for letting him speak in our sanctuary, and letting us fawn over him and go, “Oh, didn’t Joseph’s little boy grow up to be articulate; isn’t that sweet?”—in response to that, we get this attitude.

He said, “Doubtless you’re gonna quote me the old proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’

Well, I don’t know. That might have been kind of going through my mind, yes.

And then he said, “*And* you’re gonna say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

It’s a bit confusing, actually—it was a disorienting time—

Luke seems to suggest it was just *after* Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue that he went to Capernaum. Apparently there was an episode there where he was confronted in their synagogue by a demon who had taken over somebody; Jesus healed the person right in front of everybody, and the demon was gone.ⁱ Obviously a traumatic sabbath for anybody who was there that day.

And Luke doesn’t report that there are any of those kinds of miracles *before* Jesus came back to his hometown, so something seems out of order when Jesus seemed to turn on us, his home crowd, especially after we’d received him so politely.

You know, if people are being so polite, why on earth would you push them, challenge them, warn them about the inadequacy of the way they are living their faith? Why on earth would somebody do that? I couldn’t believe—I thought, “Who does this guy think he is?” I came to the synagogue today to be made comfortable. And I treated him fairly, like I try to treat all people fairly.

And *then* he goes, “Seriously, I’m telling you: no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

And I thought: Oh, so now you’re some kind of prophet?

And he said, “But you know, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when they had that three and a half year famine, but Elijah was only sent to a widow in Sidon.” In other words, not to one of *our* people. Even though we’re the Covenant People and we’re the ones who are entitled—entitled!—to have dibs on a prophet like Elijah.

And *then* he goes, “There were also a lot of lepers in Israel in Elisha’s time, and you know the only person who was cleansed? Naaman the Syrian.” Again, not even one of us!

And we in the synagogue didn’t need to be condescended to; we knew there were messages to us from God in those stories of Elijah and Elisha—hey, we were in the synagogue every week, so we’re the ones who already *knew* those stories.

So, my question was: Who on earth—I might have said who in the hell—is this guy to come into our synagogue—to come into *my* synagogue—and talk to me like that?

What does he look like?

And, what did we look like to him?

And, was I in the mob that was so angry to be confronted by his message that they—that we—were ready to throw him off a cliff?

When I say mob, I mean there was a mob mentality.

And when I say ready, I mean they—I mean we—actually marched him out of the sanctuary on that shameful day, and we took him to the edge of the cliff.

Do you have the honor of having someone in this world that you care about?

And is there anybody in this world that you've been angry enough with that you've fantasized—even just for half an instant, and you *knew* it was wrong and you *swore* you'd never really want to see it happen—

but is there anybody in this world that you've been so angry with that for that tiny nanosecond, you've fantasized about seeing some harm come to them? And then you could go, “Well, it was their own fault. They started it. They were ugly when I was being fair-minded and open and obviously morally superior.”

If you've ever been that disgusted with somebody, I want you to think about that first precious person I asked you to think about, the one whom you care so much about.

And then imagine the minutes that it took for us to march this young man—the young man who in the weeks before he came to our synagogue had faced down the devil and stood with John the Baptist—imagine how long it takes a crowd, on foot, to lead somebody out of town to the edge of a cliff. Imagine if that was your loved one. Imagine those minutes for one man at the hands of an angry mob, a mob of faithful, religious, entitled people who go to worship every Sunday.

Did he pray Psalm 71,

“In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;

incline your ear to me and save me...

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,

from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

For you, O LORD, are my hope,

my trust, O LORD, from my youth”?

What does he look like—the hands, the feet, the hair, the face, the eyes?

And what does it take to make you angry enough at someone to do, or to wish them, harm?

And, what do you think it was about what he said that didn't sit well with a roomful of faithful people?

What doesn't sit well with you when something within the Word of God challenges the notion that your faith and theology and humanity are just fine as they are, thank you very much?

What does it mean for any of us when suddenly our easy image of God is not enough? When it's no longer sufficient to hold God at a distance, or to imagine that God's job is just to keep us all from suffering?

What does it mean for me when he challenges me, questions my motives and causes me to have to choose either to stand there pathetically trying to defend myself, or to admit, in the face of God and the bathroom mirror, that I am not yet the person God made me to be, despite all my supremely confident protestations to the contrary?

They were filled with rage, and they became a mob, and they led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, so they could throw him off.

But inexplicably, he passed right through the midst of them, and then he simply went on his way. There was just too much left to do.

His ministry had literally just started: just up the road, around the corner, over the hill, there would be crowds to feed and lessons to teach and loveless people to love and guilty people to show mercy.

There was so much more he had to do—for us. He'd keep getting in trouble for this, and keep being pursued.

We can thank God that for the sake of us—who had, with so little provocation stood on the brink of throwing him down and ending his mission—he got away every time.

Except one.

Still he is working on our behalf. Come to the table, and let him take care of us again.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
February 3, 2019

¹ Luke 4:31-37