

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 21, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
WHY JESUS CAME (2)**

Luke 4:14-30

This is our second look at the story of Jesus' homecoming to Nazareth as Luke tells the story in Luke 4, following Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (4:1-13) and the early success of His ministry of teaching and healing in the villages and towns of Galilee.

In our first look at Jesus' homecoming last Sunday, we noted, among other things, that Jesus was in the habit of going to church. It was His custom on the Sabbath day, as Luke points out in verse 16, to go to the synagogue, where Jews gathered for worship. He made it a priority to be in church every week. As I said last Sunday, if it was important to Jesus, it should be important to us. If it mattered to Him, it should matter to us. I want to affirm and encourage all of you who make it a priority in your lives, whether you are coming to church in person or if, in the season of COVID, it is better and wiser for you to worship by joining us online. To all of you who follow the example of Jesus to be "in" church whenever possible, in whatever way is best for you, I thank you in the name of Jesus. If it is not your "custom," or if you have gotten out of the habit of being in church every week, let me urge you, in the name of Jesus, to rethink your priorities and to make a new commitment to worship with your church family, whether in person or virtually, Sunday after Sunday, week after week. It pleases God when we make it a priority to acknowledge and celebrate His "worth-ship," which is what worship is about. *Worship* is about the *worth-ship* of God. *We worship* Him because He is *worthy*. And, I promise you, you will be blessed when you give yourself to worship Him in the company of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Do not underestimate the importance and value of active, regular participation in the worship life of the church. As I hope you can tell, this is something I feel very strongly about. But I don't think I feel any more strongly about it than Jesus does.

The second thing we saw in our first look at this Scripture last week was what a service of worship in the synagogue would have been like, and how Jesus, who had become something of a celebrity, would have been invited to read the Scriptures and then give a message there in His hometown synagogue.

The third thing we saw was how the people in His hometown reacted to the message of Jesus. Their initial reaction was positive. They were impressed by how well and how graciously Jesus spoke. But they were not persuaded by His message. Their first impression of Jesus quickly turned sour. Almost instantly the pendulum swung from approval to disapproval. Their admiration of Jesus turned to antagonism when they weren't able to reconcile what they knew (or thought they knew) about His ancestry – His family line – with what Jesus was saying about Himself.

We didn't get to it last Sunday, but there was also the issue Jesus brought up of God's kindness and grace to non-Jewish outsiders like the widow from Zarephath in Sidon during the days of Elijah, and Naaman, the Syrian military commander, during the days of Elijah's prophetic successor Elisha (Luke 4:25-27). You can read the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17, and the story of Naaman's healing from leprosy in 2 Kings 5.

That Jesus had the audacity to suggest that God would extend His grace to such "unworthy" people as these was an affront to the people of Nazareth who viewed themselves as morally and spiritually superior to the Gentiles in surrounding regions. In fact, the good people of Nazareth were so offended, so outraged by what Jesus was suggesting that they formed a mob and tried, in effect, to lynch Him. They were incensed by what Jesus said. They were furious with Him. They were "seething with anger" (4:28, *MSG*). And what did they do? They didn't just "unfriend" Him, as people so often do today. They decided to "cancel" Jesus. Literally. They threw Him out of the synagogue and took Him by force to a high cliff at the edge of town in order to throw Him to His death. That is how angry they were.

Mary Sue and I have been to Nazareth. I think I've told you this before. When we were in Israel in June 2015, our tour bus driver was an Arab Christian named Bashir, who lived in a large, new home built into the side of one of the hills in Nazareth. Bashir actually took our whole tour group – about 40 of us – to his home on the day we visited Nazareth. From the vantage point of Bashir's home high on the side of the hill, I can easily picture what Luke describes about the mob attempting to kill Jesus by throwing Him over a cliff.

But somehow Jesus got away. Luke says that "He walked right through the crowd and went on His way" (4:30). He doesn't say *how* Jesus did it. He doesn't tell us *how* Jesus managed to walk through the crowd that was so intent on killing Him.

Have you ever wondered about that? Did Jesus somehow disappear in the crowd and slip away? Was it a miracle that enabled Him to escape? Was there something in the power of Jesus' personality that caused the mob to back off? We don't know for sure how Jesus got away from the crowd. What we do know for sure is that the time had not yet come for Jesus to give up His life. The time would come soon enough, but God the Father would not allow His Son to lose His life until the time was right for Him to freely, willingly give up His life on the cross. For us.

What we also see here is what John points out in his Gospel (John 1:11), which is that Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, "came to His own, but His own" – in this case, the people of Nazareth, His hometown – "did not receive Him." Not everyone in Nazareth rejected Him. His mother Mary was one of His most ardent followers. Joseph was probably deceased by this time. Several of Jesus' brothers, including James and Jude, would eventually come to believe in Him and take on leadership roles in the church of the New Testament. For the most part, though, the people of Nazareth wanted nothing to do with Jesus. And, sadly, as far as we know, Jesus never returned to His hometown. He never went back to Nazareth.

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THE MESSAGE OF JESUS

What Jesus said in His message at the synagogue in Nazareth, though, is of paramount importance. He gave a definitive statement of why He had come. Mary Sue and I have just started watching “*The Chosen*,” a new TV drama series based on the life of Jesus. Maybe some of you have seen season 1. The series uses considerable historical and artistic license for the purpose of enabling viewers to “see Jesus through the eyes of those who knew Him,” with the goal of remaining true to what the Scriptures teach about Jesus. Just the other evening, we watched episode 3 of season 1, in which Jesus befriends a group of children while He is living in a tent on the outskirts of Capernaum on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee. As He is talking with these children one day and teaching them about God and prayer and much more, one of the children asks: “What is your reason for being here?” She didn’t mean: Why do you happen to be here, in Capernaum? She meant: What is the purpose of your life?

Jesus answers her in the same words He read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah that day in the synagogue at Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because He has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom
to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

This is the reason Jesus came. This was and is His mission. This was and is His life’s purpose. There are other places in Scripture, other occasions when Jesus gives different, complementary answers to the question of why He came. In Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45, for example, Jesus says that He – “the Son of Man” – “did not come to be served” by others “but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Jesus came not to rule and exercise power in the world’s way but to be a servant who would ransom many from their sin and guilt. Including you and me.

In Luke 19:10, after the conversion of a despised tax-collector named Zaccheus, Jesus explains that He – “the Son of Man” – “came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). No one was more lost than Zaccheus. But, you know what? None of us, apart from God’s grace, is less lost than Zaccheus. Apart from the saving power of Jesus, none of us is less lost than he was. But Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost. Including incorrigible sinners like us.

Here is another example: In John 10, where Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd who will lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:11-18), He also says: “I have come that they” – my sheep – “may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). *The Message* expresses it this way: “I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.” You and I are included in the “they” in that verse. Jesus came so that

you may have real life, eternal life, life in a relationship of faith, hope, love, and peace with Him. Not an easier life necessarily. Not a trouble-free life. Jesus doesn't promise anyone that kind of life. But eternal life rooted in a relationship with Him that you will never lose.

One more example from the New Testament, this one not from Jesus Himself but from John the apostle in 1 John 3:8: There John says: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." As *The Message* puts it: "The Son of God entered the scene to abolish the devil's ways." It is true, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, that not everything has yet been put under the feet of Jesus in final defeat (15:25-28). But the final defeat of the devil is absolutely guaranteed by the cross of Christ and the empty tomb. For this reason, as we read in Hebrews 2, "Since the children" whom Jesus came to save "are made of flesh and blood ... the Savior took on flesh and blood in order to rescue (us) by His death. By embracing death, taking it into Himself, (Jesus) destroyed the devil's hold on death and freed all who cower through life, scared to death of death" (2: 14-15, *MSG*).

Why did Jesus come? As He said to the congregation at the synagogue in Nazareth:

- To preach good news (Greek, *euangelion*, or evangel) to the poor
- To proclaim freedom (or pardon) to prisoners
- To bring recovery of sight to the blind
- To release the oppressed (*MSG*: "To set the burdened and battered free")
- To proclaim that now is the time of God's favor.

Jesus identifies four groups of people here who are His special concern and the focus of His ministry: the poor, prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed.

The word "poor" (Greek, *ptochos*) can cover every kind of poverty. And Jesus cares about every kind of poverty. He cares about people who are impoverished materially. He cares about people who are, in today's vernacular, "food insecure." He cares about people who don't have enough money or other resources to survive, much less thrive, in today's world. He cares about the homeless. He cares about the unemployed and the underemployed. He cares about people with chronic health problems. He cares about people on our country and in every country who can't afford the things that so many of us take for granted. Yes, Jesus cares about people who live in material poverty.

But I think His main emphasis here is on the moral and spiritual poverty of sinners like us who are powerless to fix what's wrong with us. The word used here (*ptochois*) is the same word Jesus uses in the first beatitude, where He says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

Helping those who are poor in material things is an essential part of our mission as followers of Jesus, but financial prosperity is no guarantee of spiritual health. You don't need to look any further than the rich young man who was too attached to his possessions to become a follower of Jesus (Mark 10:17-22), or the rich fool who devoted his life to getting rich, but neglected the life of his soul (Luke 12:15-21), or the lukewarm Christians in the New Testament church at Laodicea who reveled in their wealth and self-sufficiency, but did not

realize that in God's eyes they were "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:14-18).

The poor to whom Jesus came with good news are people like you and me, whatever our financial condition, regardless of how rich or poor we may think we are. The good news is meant for people who know they (we) are spiritually poor. It is for people who know they (we) need God. It is for people like us who have no hope for salvation except in God's sovereign mercy. Which is what, in His saving love, Jesus holds out to us.

The word for "prisoners" or "captives" (Greek, *aichmalotōis*) was used for prisoners of war. It could also be translated "hostages." There were no POWs or hostages in Nazareth in a literal sense, but there are many forms of spiritual bondage, whether to money or lust or worry or fear or guilt or anger or whatever holds people hostage. Jesus came to set prisoners free. He can set you free from spiritual bondage in your life.

Jesus came also to restore sight to the blind. There is no doubt this has the double meaning of healing physical blindness and spiritual blindness. On many occasions Jesus restored the vision of those who were blind. I love the story of Jesus healing a blind beggar named Bartimaeus in Mark 10 (10:46-52). When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is passing by on His way from Jericho to Jerusalem, he shouts at the top of his lungs: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stops, calls Bartimaeus over, and says to him: "What do you want me to do for you?" (Is that a great question, or what!)

Bartimaeus, knowing exactly what he wants, says: "Lord, I want to see." To which Jesus replies: "Go, your faith has healed you."

What I love the most about this story is the way it ends. Mark says that immediately – instantly – Bartimaeus received his sight. And do you know what he did? "He followed Jesus on the road." It wasn't just physical sight that Bartimaeus got from Jesus. He got spiritual sight, too, and He became one of Jesus' followers.

Jesus came to give spiritual sight and insight to people blinded by sin. It is only through His amazing grace that we can say:

"I once was lost but now am found,
was blind but now I see."
(John Newton, *Amazing Grace*)

The fourth group for whom Jesus came is the oppressed. Eugene Peterson calls them "the burdened and battered" (*MSG*). The word "oppressed" can also refer to being crushed or shattered or beaten down by hard and painful circumstances in life. Millions of people in the world today are oppressed politically, or economically, or sexually, or religiously. Jesus holds them very close in His heart. The Bible tells us that "the LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

If you feel oppressed, abused, or mistreated in any way, know that you have a Savior who loves you, who is with you and for you, and who will never leave you or forsake you.

Know also that the worst oppressor in the world is Satan himself. And the worst form of oppression is the oppression of sin. Jesus came to set us and people everywhere free from every form of spiritual oppression, including (and especially) the oppression of sin itself.

In His synagogue sermon at Nazareth, Jesus announced that “The year of the Lord’s favor” had come. The year of the Lord’s favor is not a calendar year or a fiscal year or a school year or an election year. It is much bigger than that. It is the era that began with the first coming of Jesus, which will continue until He comes again.

It is easy to miss out on God’s favor. It is not hard at all. All you have to do is resist Jesus. All you have to do is reject Him. All you have to do is ignore Him. All you have to do is refuse to believe Him. All you have to do is live as though you are the most important thing in your life. All you have to do is tell Jesus to get lost and leave you alone.

If you’re tempted to do any of these things, please don’t. You will regret it for eternity.

Instead, open your heart to embrace the Savior who came to die for you to give His life as a ransom for you; who came to seek and to save the lost; who came to give us real, abundant, eternal life; who came to destroy the works of the devil and to free us from the fear of death.

Embrace Jesus in the fullness of who He is. Thank God He came. And let Him have your life. He can do more with it than you can.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.