

The sermon in Nazareth

Luke meticulously lays the foundation that Jesus is God's promised Messiah, pointing to an



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angelic revelation to both Mary and Zechariah, the heavenly hosts revealing to lowly shepherds that this "promised one" is born in a humble animal shed in Bethlehem, the startling affirmation of Simeon and Anna at the Temple, Jesus' impressive visit with the scholars at the Temple when he was only 12 years old and Jesus' baptism by the unorthodox prophet John.

Only after this impressive stream of events does Luke record the genealogy of Jesus (contrasted with Matthew 1:1-17), beginning "Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age, being supposedly (as it was being thought) the son of Joseph" (Luke 3:23, NASV). Luke's intent was most likely to show Jesus, not as a mysterious heavenly being who fell from the sky, but a real flesh and blood person whose coming has been evident in the unfolding of God's revelation through history. There is a unique blending of the spiritual and natural, an excited announcement that this Jesus will confound everyone!

By the time Luke has Jesus come home for a visit, the stories have already been filtering back to Nazareth. Think about your reaction if stories about one of your children's playmates told of his amazing miracles and spiritual wisdom. As Luke was researching the life of Jesus he would have seen this Nazareth visit as Jesus' opportunity to declare and define his ministry. The reaction was confusion, anger and a threat to Jesus' life (Luke 4:28-30).

Notice that Luke places the synagogue rejection story immediately after Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, facing Satan's carefully designed temptations. In fact, that wilderness challenge continued all the way to the cross. Evil is not just a challenge now and then in our world; it is ever present, often in places we think should be safe or off limits.

Given the order of a typical Sabbath service, the invitation for this son of Nazareth to speak is not unusual. A synagogue service had three parts: worship, primarily prayer; reading of Scripture, both Law and Prophets; and teaching, when the synagogue leader would invite a guest teacher to speak. Often the last event included a discussion of the teaching.

The readings followed a plan and that day Isaiah 61:1-2 must have been the prophetic reading. Evidently Jesus' teachings were already circulating through the province. Jesus read the assigned passage, handed the scroll back to the official and began to expound. The passage was well known, but Jesus' identification with the words shocked everyone. Jesus declares he has been anointed by God's Spirit, has come to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed and proclaim the year of God's favor.

There must have been a stunned silence as Jesus looked out at the crowd and said: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it" (Luke 4:21).

The reference "the year of the Lord's favor" means the year of "Jubilee" (Leviticus 25:8-17), which was supposed to be observed every 50 years in Israel but had never been kept! Jubilee was to be marked by the release of all slaves, forgiveness of all debts and the return of all land to the owners or their heirs.

By the time of Jesus, the idea of Jubilee had been attached to expectations of the coming Messiah, when God's justice would reshape the world and all wrongs would be righted.

Everybody was in a celebratory mood until Jesus began to explain the meaning of Isaiah's words. He dared to use familiar stories but apply them to the world of his hearers. God sent Elijah to a widow of Zarephath, and he sent Elisha to heal Namaan, the Syrian (Luke 4:24-28). Why would any man claiming to come from God speak of filthy Gentiles receiving God's blessing? The crowds muttering went from "I

Formations

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Scripture: Luke 4:16-22

thought this was Joseph's son!" to "Kill that Gentile lover!"

Can we see ourselves in the anger and disdain of that crowd's words and their attempt on Jesus' life? The last several years I have heard very disturbing words from some preachers and politicians who repeat flawed religious platitudes and call for our return to Christian values then turn around and condemn those who are different from "us," those deserving of God's wrath.

"Jubilee," God's forgiveness and restoration, is not just for the "chosen ones" but also for every person on this earth. Check your anger level after that statement! Grace has nothing to do with race, economic standing, nationality, cultural background or self-perceived worthiness. Christ did not come into this world to save a select few or those who are like us. The cross knows only one barrier: a person's refusal to accept the gift of God's Son!

You would think Nazareth could celebrate this Jesus who had grown up with their children and was now announcing the arrival of God's longed-for promise. There should have been dancing and singing in the streets, but instead there was seething resentment. I suspect the reason "Jubilee" was never kept in the history of Israel: Why should the undeserving be given freedom from poverty and restoration of their standing as property owners?

Is it possible for us to gain freedom from prejudice and selfishness, to experience and offer forgiveness to others, to offer healing and hope to this broken world? Yes! Listen to Jesus declare that "Jubilee" has come, that God's grace can change the human heart and that new life comes through Jesus the Christ for all who truly believe!

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmstead enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.