

Jesus' Rejection at Nazareth

A Sermon for Every Sunday, February 3, 2019

by Dr. William H. Willimon

Luke 4:21-30

Let me ask you a basic question: What do you expect from a sermon? What would you most like to happen to you when you are listening to a sermon? Ok. Now's your chance, what do you listen for in a sermon?

Over the years, I have asked that question ("What do you expect from a sermon?) of many laity. Here are some of the responses I have received: *I like a sermon that helps me think about a biblical passage in a new and fresh way.... I think a sermon ought to point out ways that I have gone wrong and to suggest ways that I can get my life back on track.... I want inspiration from a sermon, a feeling that I have been taken to a higher place, or have been given a special feeling, as the result of the sermon.... The best sermons are those that give me something that's easy to remember, something I can take home with me.*

Now, while there is some truth, some appropriateness in all of these responses to the question, "What you expect from a sermon?" Problem is, none of them align well with this Sunday's gospel – Jesus preaching at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth.

In a number of places, Jesus is depicted as a preacher. And yet, we have very few accounts of Jesus's actual preaching. Today is one of those few places. What do you think Jesus hoped to accomplish in this sermon?

Luke says that this was Jesus's first sermon. Very first time we see Jesus in action in the pulpit. Jesus goes back to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. They give him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He reads wonderful words of promise from that scroll. If you were here last Sunday, you've heard those words: *the spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to preach the year of God's favor. These words have been fulfilled in your hearing.*

There just had to be a stirring in the congregation when Jesus read those stunning words. At long last this long awaited time of deliverance, foretold by the prophet Isaiah, is fulfilled. Now. Today. Undoubtedly, there was excitement in the congregation in Nazareth. After all, who is more deserving of God's salvation, God's restoration than suffering, oppressed, occupied Israel?

At last, God is making good on God's promises. At last, God is coming for us. Good news!

The preacher rolls up the scroll and, as was the custom, sits down to preach. *And that is when the trouble starts.* They were having themselves a nice praise service. Jesus has them eating out of his hand. He is the hometown boy who reads so well. And what wonderful words! And all might have gone well...if Jesus had not preached.

The preacher says, in effect, “Isaiah says that God is coming to deliver the faithful. I say that that day of the Lord’s advent is now. Now let’s see, when was the last time that God came to us? During the time of the great prophet Elijah, there had to be many famished Jewish women when there was a great food shortage in the land. It is interesting to find that God’s prophet gave food to none of those hungry Jewish women, but only to a Gentile, pagan woman.”

And you can almost feel the adoring, hometown congregation become silent and sullen.

The preacher continues, “And there had to be lots of people suffering from various illnesses during the time of the prophet Elisha, but God’s prophet healed none of them. Only one, a Syrian Army officer, was healed.”

(I’m sure that “Syrian Army officer” meant exactly the same thing then in Israel that it means today.)

“When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff.”

Wow, I’ve had negative reactions to some of my sermons over the years, but never has anybody in the congregation tried to murder me because of my preaching!

Why did the congregation in Nazareth become so upset? What turned their initial adoration in to murderous rage?

Well, put yourself in their place. Here we are, God’s people, recipients of the promises of God to be with us and to deliver us. And yet for centuries we have been the victims of the cruelty of other nations. Even now, the Roman Empire has its heel up on our necks. When is God going to make good on God’s promises and come for us? After all, we are God’s chosen people, God’s beloved.

The preacher says the day of deliverance is now. And we like the sound of that. But then the preacher continues, just working from our own sacred Scriptures, to remind us of those occasions when God previously came among us, but God behaved in ways we did not expect, in ways that we do not appreciate. That day in Nazareth, the young, hometown boy preacher reminded the faithful that during the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, God had worked the other side of the street. God had worked compassionate wonders, not for the chosen people, but for pagan outsiders. God had shown mercy to those who did not worship Israel’s God.

And who among us, the faithful, appreciates being reminded that God has behaved in ways that are different from our expectations in the past, and might well do so again?

So back to my opening question: what do you expect from a sermon? The congregation in Nazareth surely expected to be reminded that they were numbered among the chosen. Down through the ages, they had remained steadfast. They had worshiped God, even though God had provided them with little validation of or reward for their fidelity. They had remained faithful to God, even when they had received little evidence that God was faithful to them.

And now, in Jesus's sermon, they did not enjoy being reminded that God had not lived up to their expectations before, and God might well do so again, that God was free, sovereign, to show mercy on those whom God would show mercy, to love whomever God chose to love.

Here's a stab at a response to the question, "What do you expect out of a sermon?" A response based on this morning's gospel:

The purpose of a sermon, a Christian sermon, is to bring you closer to the true and living God. Sometimes in sermons you get helpful hints for better living. Sometimes you receive answers to your most pressing questions. But the main thing you get is the gift of being with the God who, in Jesus Christ, has chosen to be with you.

And sometimes that closeness with God feels good and sometimes ...it doesn't feel so good but your feeling bad or good or bad is not the main point. Sometimes what you hear sounds like good news and sometimes it sounds like bad news but the main thing is you have heard God's news.

I've got a Rabbi friend who says, quote. Judaism is a rather simple religion that is based on two profound articles of faith: There is only one God. You are not it."

Is that close to what the folk at Nazareth experienced in Jesus's sermon? They arrived at the synagogue that day with their conceptions of God firmly in place. But then the preacher, using nothing but scripture, *corrected*, expanded, critiqued, enriched their idea of who God is and what God was up to. God's projects, God's intentions, God's concerns are bigger than this congregation.

Maybe you could take that as a definition of an effective sermon. *An effective sermon occurs when we are reminded that God is God and we are not.*

Every person in the synagogue in Nazareth that day began the day by reciting the great Jewish Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one." Jesus, good Jew that he was, reminded the faithful that it's not like the Syrians have their God, and we have our patron God who runs errands just for us. There was only one God. Our God is determined to be their God, as well. Our God is not our tamed pet. God is God. We are not.

We are always in danger of attempting to cut the great, glorious God down to our size, to substitute other gods for the true and living God. That's when we ought to pray that we're about to hear a sermon that again reminds us that God is bigger than our meager concepts, our vain desires, and our little projects.

My predecessor at Duke Chapel, James Clelland, when asked what he thought about Children's Sermons used to reply:

A pastor had a children's sermon. He called all the children down front and asked them, "Boys and girls, what eats nuts, lives in a tree, and has a bushy tail?"

One little boy shouted out, "God?"

The congregation erupted with laughter. The Children's Sermon was ruined. There was nothing to do but have a closing prayer and send the children back to their families.

After service, as the little boy was emerging from church, the pastor pulled him aside and said, "Look kid. Why did you answer 'God' when I asked that question about squirrels?"

The little boy, without missing a beat, looked up at the pastor and said, "You're a preacher. Right? This is church. Right? You're supposed to be talking about God, not squirrels."

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