

Jesus Rejected in Nazareth

Matthew 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6; **Luke 4:16-30**

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself. What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.’” He said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away. (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Visiting rabbis were often given opportunities to teach, but Nazareth, a village of 1600-2000 inhabitants, already knew Jesus and, thus, would be less open to thinking about him in new ways.
- Synagogues followed regular lectionary readings later on, but in this time period readers had more freedom to choose the reading from the Prophets. “Opening” the book meant unrolling the Hebrew scroll to the right place.
- The passage Jesus quotes (Isaiah 61:1-2) seems to describe Israel’s future in terms of the year of Jubilee, or year of release, from Leviticus 25. Some scholars have suggested that a recent Jubilee year may have made this text fresh in the minds of Jesus’ hearers; other scholars dispute whether this even remained a current practice in mainstream Judaism. That Luke ends the quote on a note of salvation is probably intentional, but his readers who knew Scripture well would know how the passage continues.
- Immediacy (“Today”) is the initial key to the coming offense. The text Jesus reads is supposed to be fulfilled in the messianic era, and the inhabitants of Nazareth saw neither the Messiah nor the messianic era before them. Since residents of Nazareth lived only four miles from Sepphoris, they were well aware of how the Romans had destroyed that Galilean capital after a messianic-style revolt in A.D. 6. Thus, inhabitants of this area are suspicious of messianic announcements.

- Teachers normally sat to expound Scripture. The synagogue attendant was the chazzan (i.e. the official responsible for the upkeep of the building, scrolls, etc.). Synagogues were probably less formal than churches or synagogues of today, so the attention of those present is significant.

- Writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, who believed they lived on the verge of the end time, often stressed the immediacy of prophecies, applying descriptions of Nahum, Habakkuk and others to their own day. Thus, interpreting the Bible this way was not in itself offensive to first-century Palestinian Jews; the offense was implying that the end time had arrived in Jesus' own ministry.

- Jesus mentions the socially weak (widows) and marginalized (lepers), but the main point is that non-Jews were the ones to accept two of the major "signs" prophets of the Old Testament. Sidon and Syria were among the particularly despised areas. Jesus' point here is that Nazareth will not receive him, but non-Jews will.

- A mob could not legally conduct capital punishment in Jewish Palestine, so the crowd here is unusually angry, especially to attempt this execution on the Sabbath. Although Nazareth does not appear to have been built on a hill, like many ancient cities it was set in the hill country with plenty of jagged rocks and cliffs nearby. Stoning began with throwing the criminal over a cliff, then hurling rocks nearly the size of one's head on top of the victim, aiming for the chest first.

Questions:

- + What is most striking to you about this passage, and why? What is most disturbing, and why?
- + What does Jesus reveal about himself and his ministry from the text of Scripture he quotes? What does Jesus reveal about his audience by his response to their offense in Matt. 13:55-57? Was there a time when you were accepted by strangers, but rejected by family? If so, explain.
- + Mark 6:5-6 says, "he could do no mighty work there... he marveled because of their unbelief." According to those verses, what role does faith play in God's power to work in human lives? To what extent do you trust God to work in your life? How can you trust God more?
- + Why did the stories of a widow from Sidon and Naaman from Syria enrage Jews in Nazareth? What point was Jesus making at that time? How does the point Jesus made then apply today? What is your "take-away" from this passage, and how might God want to apply it to your life?