

Augusta First Baptist Church

June 24, 2007

Luke 4:16-30

Dead Men Talking – And One More Who Lives to Tell About it.

Luke

NRS Luke 4:16 *When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23 He 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.'" 24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But 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; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They 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. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

NRS Isaiah 61:1 *The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.*

In the 1992 movie, **"A Few Good Men,"** Tom Cruise plays a Navy defense lawyer defending a soldier who was wrongly accused of murder. There was one particularly tense scene in the movie, when he was cross-examining Colonel Jessep (played by Jack Nicholson) and pressing him for honest answers. The Colonel was being evasive, hiding behind militaristic clichés and veiled impressions of leadership. The scene escalates, with Tom Cruise shrieking to the Colonel, "I want the truth, sir," in which Jack Nicholson shouts back, "You can't handle the truth." He may have been right.

Can any of us really handle the truth? We speak much about "wanting to hear the truth." We expect our leaders to be truthful, our teachers to be truthful, and our ministers to be truthful. I wonder, however, do we really want to hear the truth? I cannot tell you how often I hear the teachers lament how defensive parents get, when in conference, they try to explain the truth about their child. "Not my child..."

We conclude this series on Old Testament prophets with the New Testament prophet, Jesus – the one who still lives. Our text focuses on Luke 4, whose story actually begins at verse 16.

Jesus did not "play to the crowd" as the saying goes, even though we could understand the temptation. In verse 15, we read that Jesus was *praised by everyone*, and in verse 22 *...all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth*. The reader is being set up for a surprise, a reversal of sorts, but right now it seems his public ministry is off to a good start. The chatter is positive, the press is favorable, and the rumblings are supportive. It sounds like Jesus is a local boy who is making them proud.

Prophets, however, do not win popularity contests. They are not that interested in being liked or admired or even accepted. The prophet's concern is speaking the truth, even when the truth is something we would rather not hear.

I confess to you that my life-long struggle is to play towards the affirmation of others. Are any of you like that? I want to be liked, approved, loved, to be popular, and so on. I would make a lousy prophet, because there is always this little voice saying, "what would your family think, what would church members think, what would your friends think..." and so on. Some of you commented to me about a phrase I used in a sermon a few weeks back. I said, "I will not always preach to you what you want to hear, but what you need to hear." Alas, I am not always so bold.

My vocation as a minister is especially vulnerable to compromising truth. Sure, everyone expects that when the preacher stands behind the pulpit, that minister will proclaim the truth. The truth is, that countless ministers each year are terminated from their office for taking a stand on the truth. In 1964, Rev. Earl Stallings shook the hand of a black visitor to his church, at the First Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on Easter morning. Subsequently, he was called awful names by his own members and paid a heavy price. He received bomb threats, threats to his family, and so on. Why? Because he practiced the truth in receiving all who come in the name of Jesus.

In reality many do not want to hear the truth, at least not all of it.

In this series on prophets, we have learned that above all other definitions of what a prophet is, most importantly a prophet is a **truth teller**. A prophet points us to the truth, and the irony is, like the Colonel in the movie, we often cannot handle it.

We admire prophets, but usually when they are historical. Take Rosa Parks for example. Today, we admire her courage because in 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. We can look back and say, "good for her," and admire her quiet resolve that ultimately caused a nation to reevaluate segregation, civil rights and so on. In 1955, however, she was arrested, prosecuted and convicted. She was reviled along with the larger Civil Rights community. We look back and say, she was "prophetic," but at the time, many saw her as a troublemaker who challenged the status quo.

Let us look back some two thousand years to what Jesus is saying. Consider the following verses read earlier: *24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But 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; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."*

You recall a few weeks ago, when I preached on Elijah, and the miracle of oil and meal for the widow and her son. The widow and son were outside of Israel – foreigners, if you will. The same is said of Elisha with the leper Naaman, the Syrian. Naaman was outside of Israel, yet like the widow, was blessed by the prophetic ministry. Jesus jabs them where it hurts: their nationalism, triumphalism and parochialism. What Jesus was saying to his own people is, that you cannot handle the truth when it is right before you, but God is not in your own limited image. This made them furious. "Who is he," we can hear them say, "this son of Joseph?" As William Willimon writes, "from the moment Jesus sets foot in the pulpit, things get nasty." (*Christian Century*, January 27, 2004) The funny thing is, according to Luke, this was his first sermon.

Jesus is pressing the people – his own people – to move from being admirers to followers. Following Jesus is rooted into the prophetic tradition of neighborly love through action.

What appears to have angered the people, is Jesus' insinuation, that God's love is not limited. God's love is not limited by geographical lines or theological categories. Poor are poor, no matter the location or situation. The same could be said for the blind, the lame and so on. The point is, God has tremendous concern for those on the margins of the ordered.

The text presses us to ask ourselves, "how are we limiting the reach of God?" Allen Culpepper writes in his commentary on Luke: "In the end, because they were not open to the prospect of others' sharing in the bounty of God's deliverance, they themselves were unable to receive it" (*New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 108). It would seem it is easier for many of us to speak of what God is against, instead of what or who God is for. ***When we put a limit on God's grace for others, we limit ourselves.***

Notice too, how odd it is that the people are so outraged at this topsy-turvy kind of gospel that Jesus preaches, that they seek to throw him over a cliff. As Luke tells the story, Jesus just walks away unnoticed. They were so indignant that they did not even notice God moving in their midst.

I wonder about all the times the gospel most offends me, and so, because of my personal offense, I too, miss the presence of God.

Someone once said, that there is something about church that brings out the best in people and the worst in people. I think that is true.

Here, Jesus is offering to the people a mission that is greater than self-centered, preoccupation. Jesus addressed an audience who were content with provincial maintenance, instead of a God-sized mission. The mission is bigger than personal offenses and private opinions. The mission is greater than denominational squabbles and political alliances.

The issue that is left with us is, will we allow Christ's mission - *to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free* – to be bigger than our personal maintenance?

The difference is between pettiness and greatness. It is the difference of leaving things as they have always been or embracing newness. Jesus said, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." If we cling to yesterday, we are no better than the angry mob where Christ walks on by undetected.

We know how the congregation of Jesus felt. They wanted Jesus to fit into their agenda and their opinion. "Isn't this," they say, "Joseph's boy?" And so Jesus, the incarnation of God, passes them by.

Because we have opened his word today and heard from the ancient text of Isaiah, and the sermon of Jesus, and the prophet has spoken in our hearing today, of its fulfillment, we have a chance to see Jesus and follow Jesus from our mission to His mission.

The prophet Jesus speaks words of truth in our world of distortions and illusions. These words demand a hearing, demand a voice and demand a lifestyle.

Have you ever listened to the statements of Jesus? I mean really listened?

- *Weep no more...*
- *Do not be afraid...*
- *Your sins are forgiven...*
- *I will never leave you or forsake you...*
- *Stand up and walk...*
- *Neither do I condemn you...*

- *Peace I leave with you...*
- *I do choose, be made clean...*
- *Today, you will be with me...*
- *“And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32)*

Now, these words are not merely for our own benefit. That was part of the mistake of the residents in Nazareth. These are words that need to be shared worldwide. In an age of CNN, Fox News, and Rush Limbaugh, where popular opinion runs thick, we must be watchful guardians of truth. It will lead us to good news. Maybe we can't handle the truth. But praise God, may we handle his good news and proclaim it to a world saturated in bad news.