



FAITH IN THE PRESENT TENSE
Luke 4:14-30

We just read the story of Jesus' visit – his homecoming so to speak – to the town and local synagogue of Nazareth – where he was raised and nurtured.

We begin our lesson in **verses 14 and 15** which read: “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everyone praised him.”¹ The words “. . . **In the power of the Spirit . . .**” are crucial for our understanding of this passage today. It signals to us that Jesus does not act by human authority or for personal gain. It is so easy in the busyness of church life with its administrative responsibilities to prepare for service and mission by human insight and wisdom alone. This is where the church can lose its missional focus and power very quickly. Jesus returns “. . . **in the power of Spirit . . .**” Luke's gospel is filled with more references to the Holy Spirit than the other three gospels combined. None of us are equipped to do the work God has called us to do – without the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reassures us that our relationship to God continues in the present tense – not the past tense. The power of faith is fully engaged when the Holy Spirit is present.

Now Jesus had been in active ministry about one year – which is why there is a buzz in the neighborhood in his hometown. We further learn from **verses 14, 15, and 16**, that it was the weekly spiritual discipline of our Lord to worship in the synagogue every Saturday. However boring or interesting it was – Jesus went to be with the people of God and more importantly with the Father. Even then I am sure – there was the temptation of fishing or boating on the Lake of Galilee – or the 18th hole at the Nazareth Country Club.

If anybody had the right to say that the religious system was corrupt and full of hypocrites it would have been Jesus – but here we find Jesus sitting amongst them. Remember that the next time you are fed up with church work. Jesus never boycotted the local church – or withheld his tithe or offering. On the Sabbath Day he joined his voice with his fellow Jews at his hometown or local congregation for divine worship. This is where we pick up our text today.

I can remember the first time I returned to my church family in Newark, N. J., right before I was ordained Deacon in 1979. The place was packed. I received a standing ovation when I finished!

Denzel Washington and Whitney Houston starred in a remake of the classic film **THE PREACHER'S WIFE**. All the movie scenes that took place inside the church were in my home church. I remembered the spot where I went forward at an altar call, the font where I was baptized as an infant, the altar railing where I was confirmed. Perhaps these were some of the same emotions and thoughts that were evoked as Jesus returned to his hometown family.

However, here in Nazareth, Jesus had worked and labored alongside Joseph in the carpenter shop. He most likely had assumed responsibility for the business.

Then he trained his other brothers to take over the shop. He could remember going to the synagogue with Joseph until his death – and then with the other men of the town.

It was here that perhaps Jesus attended Nazareth synagogue school. Perhaps some of the men present had been his teachers or mentors.

It was here that Jesus brought the tithe to God's house every Sabbath. We know that Jesus had worshiped in other places – but this was his special place.

It was here that Jesus first learned the Hebrew language necessary to read the sacred scrolls. Jesus was probably bar mitzvahed here. It was here that Jesus grew from a mere lad to full manhood. Mary, his mother, pondered all these things in her heart.

Yes, they were thrilled to have him back – the hometown boy had gained quite a reputation. His fame now filled the landscape and the conversation at the local coffee shops.

So, the service at the Nazareth synagogue begins with Jesus being present. I believe the local people looked upon Jesus with great admiration.

We don't know if Jesus selected the text himself – or it was assigned to him to read. Now Jesus had to open a scroll – they did not have books yet with chapters and verses at the local synagogue. So Jesus unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read these very familiar words to them:

**“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 for the prisoners – and recovery of sight to the
blind,
To release the oppressed
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”²**

Yes, this portion of God's word had all the makings of a great sermon. After he read it – he handed the scroll back to the attendant – and sat down to begin teaching. All Jewish rabbis sat to teach – and this was a sign to the people to listen attentively.

This was Jesus' inaugural message – which would set the stage for his entire ministry. The first word out of his mouth was the word “**Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**” So far – so good. Jesus had the hometown in the palm of his hands. They nodded with their approval. Nobody was sleeping in church that day.

You almost wonder why Jesus just didn't leave it right there. However – just because we know God's word does not mean we are faithful to its radical claims

Yes, they admired Jesus. They opened their synagogue to him – but you only wish that they would have opened their hearts and minds as well. We do know that 'words' produce different emotions – in different people. Jesus, their own native son of the synagogue, reads out of their own scriptures.

The greatest book written in recent years on the art of spiritual reading is entitled **EAT THIS BOOK** by Eugene H. Peterson. In it Eugene reminds us that we are to 'eat this book.' Not merely read our Bibles – but eat this book.³

He further reminds us that Christians 'feed' on scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the faith community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use scripture. We assimilate it into our lives. It gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, healing, ministry, evangelism and justice in Jesus' name.⁴ Now, we understand why Jesus said, 'My bread (food) is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work.'⁵ I wonder if the congregation at Nazareth really knew what they were doing when they asked Jesus to read from the sacred scrolls.

Eugene Peterson takes the title for his book from **Revelation 10:8-10**. Let's turn to it: "Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more. 'Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the Angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.'

"So I went to the Angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, 'Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour – but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.' I took the little scroll from the Angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour."⁶

In my 33 years of preaching and studying, I have felt that in my study and here in the sanctuary. God's word has the unique ability to delight and disturb all at the same time. The Bible reveals truth – not just for informational purposes – but for transformational power. The message is informational – but also incarnational. Hearing and doing are like two sides of a coin. James reminds us not only to be listeners – but doers of the word of God.

Yes, reading the scriptures is not an activity separate from living the gospel – but one integral to it. It means letting **another** have a say in everything we are saying and doing. It is as easy as that – and as hard.⁷

Jesus changes the landscape of that local congregation when he employs a five letter word – **today**. Faith – hope – love – commitment – and evangelism were no longer in the past tense – but now in the present. A new horizon – a journey – was being called for – activated. They were being addressed – spoken to. No longer spectators. Yes, “You can’t reduce this book to what you can handle.

You can’t domesticate this book to what you are comfortable with. You can’t make it your toy poodle – trained to respond to your commands.”⁸

Eugene Peterson shares that for years there was a part of John’s words in **Revelation 10:8-10** that he tried to avoid – a detail to overlook: that the Bible was not written to flatter us – but to involve us in God’s reality – that doesn’t cater to our fantasies of ourselves. There are hard things to hear, hard things to obey.”⁹

At times – this book has absolutely no respect or time for my needs – my wants – my feelings. It was like a certain medicine my doctor friend once gave me to take. If I wanted to be healed – if I wanted to be well – I had to take it. One of the great truths we learn from the temptations that Satan engaged our Lord in – was the use of the Bible – the word of God. Satan mastered the Bible – but Jesus actually submitted himself in obedience to its authority. This Satan could not do – which is why he is forever expelled from heaven – and the kingdom of God.

Bishop William Willimon – our resident Bishop in Northern Alabama – in a publication written primarily for pastors like me shares: “The Bible is not content to leave us as we are. In reading the Bible, we become God’s promised new creations. God the Great Creator is not yet finished with the world or with your life. Don’t risk reading the Bible if you are content with your life as it is. When you read a biblical text and it challenges you – or you find it questionable – don’t question the text – try questioning yourself. Too often we try to change the biblical text when we should be changing ourselves.”¹⁰

The good bishop ends his column with this advice to us: “One suggestion to ask yourself is, ‘How would I have to change in order to align my life to God’s expectations for my life?’ We read every biblical text – not just for agreement and to understand – but also for conversion and change.”¹¹

From our text in **Nehemiah** we discover in **verse 8**, that it is not enough to hold it in reverence or even just to read it publicly – it also must be explained and taught. The meaning of ancient scripture must be made plain in a new time.¹²

This Jesus does – and it changes his church family from welcoming him to trying to kill him. Be sure you bring your Bibles and yourself to church next Sunday and discover why.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

January 24, 2010 – 10:30 a.m. only

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FAITH IN THE PRESENT TENSE – PART 2

Luke 4:14-30, Isaiah 40:6-8

Last week we began our journey of studying and applying the meaning of the visit of Jesus to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. They opened their synagogue to him – and invited their native son to read a lesson out of their sacred scripture. Jesus changed the entire landscape of his faith family when he shared the word “**today.**”

As a faith community they also knew the words of **Isaiah 40:8**, “The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”¹³ This truth had sustained them through the various exiles – but somehow it had become a forgotten truth and reality for them. It was all in the past; so familiar that it lost its power.

We shared last week that God’s word has the ability to delight and disturb at the same time. Something happens that this admiring crowd turns into an angry mob.

We know from **verse 22** that their initial response to Jesus is generous and gracious as this verse clearly reveals to us. However in **verse 23** something happens that they felt Jesus was antagonizing them. Anguish was felt. Jesus moves from nurturing them to nudging them. God’s word has this quality to it. Our knowledge of God’s word becomes a religious substitution for living faith in him.

One of the most fascinating books I have read in the past 20 years was written by Philip Yancey entitled **THE JESUS I NEVER KNEW.** Mr. Yancey – like a skilled surgeon – unravels the way we have ‘domesticated’ Jesus, the ways we have labeled and defined him, the ways we have closed ourselves to him and his explosive power to change and transform us to be his faithful disciples. Here they thought they had a surefire candidate – and he had to go and spoil it.

They had become content to survive – rather than thrive as a community of faith. Perhaps he could sense and feel the hesitation and skepticism among them. As I shared last week – their faith was locked into a past that imprisoned them – rather than setting them free and on fire with faith. A faith that is alive and kicking does demand more from us.

They begin to check Jesus’ credentials just a little closer. **“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” “Who is he to say ‘today?’”** Something else besides admiration begins to grow in their hearts. Most likely people began to say to one another “Aren’t Messiahs

supposed to be able to do great miracles – healings – signs and wonders?” They had heard rumors about such work in other places – why not a little magic show right here in Nazareth? Jesus probably looks right into their eyes – and realizes they are not ready to be part of the coming of God’s new order. Perhaps their hatred of the enemy surpassed the love of God which was to be the dominant force in their hearts.

The famous preacher, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, tells of going to visit Niagara Falls. Standing on the Canadian side and seeing the raw, awesome power of the falls, a tourist nearby says, “Sir, I believe this to be the greatest unused power in the world.” Dr. Fosdick replied, “I must respectfully disagree. The greatest unused power in the world is the power of faith.” Jesus’ congregation though the greatest tragedy for them was the oppression of the Roman Empire – Jesus indicates it is the omission of faith.

In **verses 23 & 24**, “Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to me: “Physician, heal yourself!’ Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.” “I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” **This had to hit them like a ton of bricks.**

This truth and insight disturbed them – so they had to go about the work of dismissing him. When we sing words like “Grant us wisdom – Grant us courage for the living of these days” – don’t be surprised if God’s Spirit actually falls on someone to do exactly that. Be careful how we sing “**Here I am, Lord.**” I did – and my plans for my life were totally changed.

Let me share with you how this ancient text of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth is a story that the church must constantly keep in front of her.

Our spiritual mentor, John Wesley, was an ordained and dedicated priest of the Church of England. He was the son of a priest and devout Christian mother. He had all the right schooling and credentials. He was a student of the New Testament – and dearly loved and honored the sacred scriptures. From his study of the ‘scrolls’ so to speak – he became greatly concerned about the spiritual complacency of the Church of England. He raises the concerns of the institutional church’s apathy to reach the masses of people who were disconnected from her work. He wanted to re-invigorate the church with faith spoken and lived out in the present tense. He disturbs them.

He was determined to relate the mission of the church to the cruel realities of life that so many of her people were subjected to. The church was locked into a survival mode rather than a vision that propelled them forward to serve the present age.

History records that this son of the Church of England – with great reluctance – began field preaching on April 2, 1739 at 7:00 in the morning – and four thousand coal miners gathered to hear a small man with a shrill voice preach and proclaim the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to them. Can you guess what passage of sacred scripture he read? It goes as follows:

**The Spirit of the Lord God
is upon me
because the Lord hath
anointed me to preach
good tidings unto the meek,
he hath sent me to bind
up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prisons to
them that are bound,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.¹⁴**

For all of his love and enthusiasm for the Church of England – they responded to his ministry by officially forbidding him to preach in their pulpits. It was only many years later that the institutional church recognized his work as a reformer – and so honored him. Yes, it can be revealing when faith demands a response in the present tense.

As Bishop Willimon reminds us: “Christianity is a people who begin with the action of taking up the scrolls and being confronted with the stories of God. There may be religions which begin with long walks in the woods – communing with nature – getting close to trees. **However, Christianity is not one of those.**”¹⁵ A congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by, and attempts to form its life in response to the word of God.¹⁶

I suspect that the folks at the Nazareth synagogue were pleased with Jesus as long as it benefited them. However, when God’s blessings might be shared with others – then it was no longer preaching – but meddling.

The implications of Jesus’ message were so disturbing that they – in self-defense – reacted with fear and anger. Jesus’ message made a demand on them – and they were furious.

God had chosen the nation of Israel and its people to be a light to the nations – to share – to shine it everywhere – but they turned inward and forgot their mission. In Luke’s gospel – salvation is not restricted to the sons of Abraham – but it is for every son and daughter of Adam and Eve. Jesus comes not only to save the Jews – but the world. Jesus is not rejected because he went outside his tradition – but because he applied the tradition they had.

Yes, Israel had forgotten their mission – even though they liked reading about it in Isaiah. As one church consultant said, they had **I.D.D. – Intention Deficit Disorder.**¹⁷ Then Jesus once again – has the audacity to return back to their sacred book. He shares two stories known to everyone in the crowd. They find these two stories quite disturbing – because they are indicted for their anti-Gentile prejudice by their own traditions – their very own book – and by one of their very own sons.¹⁸

Now, sometimes before the truth sets us free – it will antagonize us at first. However, if we stick to it – the greater and more excellent way will open up – and we will only wonder why we did not recognize the truth before this.

Now I want you to turn to **Isaiah 61:1-2**. Unless you know this verse word for word you will miss an important insight. Jesus reads **Isaiah 61:1-2** – but he stops his quote right in mid-sentence: “. . . . to proclaim the favorite year of the Lord”

He never uses the last phrase “. . . .**and the day of vengeance of our God.**” The Jewish people wanted this promise more than anything else to be fulfilled. It will be fulfilled – but at his Second Coming – not at his first. He will come to judge the living and the dead.

They wanted the Messiah to exterminate their enemies – and Jesus talks about an evangelism program to save their enemy, and going the second mile. Perhaps now you understand why Jesus’ words angered them. The late Dr. William S. Coffin often remarked that “Jesus preferred to be rejected for who he was – rather than to be accepted for who he wasn’t.”

Eugene Peterson was right: God’s words were not written to flatter us – but to involve us into God’s reality – which does not cater to our fantasies.¹⁹

May the Spirit fill us as well and grant us wisdom and courage to follow him in discipleship – **TODAY!**

Amen and amen.

January 31, 2010

ENDNOTES

¹ NIV, Luke 4:14-15.

² Isaiah 61:1-2b. It is noticeable - as I share later in the sermon - that Jesus stops right in the middle of the second verse.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **EAT THIS BOOK**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, page 15.

⁴ Ibid, Peterson, page 18.

⁵ John 4:34.

⁶ Revelation 10:8-10, NIV.

⁷ Op. cit, **EAT THIS BOOK**, page XII.

⁸ Ibid, Peterson, page 66.

⁹ Ibid, Peterson, pages 63, 64.

¹⁰ William H. Willimon, **“Pulpit Resource,”** volume 38, No. 1, Jan-March, 2010, page 27.

¹¹ Ibid, **“Pulpit Resource,”** page 27.

¹² Fred B. Craddock, [et.al], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR C,”** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, first edition, 1994, page 85.

¹³ NKJV, Isaiah 40:8.

¹⁴ KJV, this would have been the version that John Wesley would have used.

¹⁵ William H. Willimon, **SHAPED BY THE BIBLE**, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1990, page 17.

¹⁶ Ibid, Willimon, page 11.

¹⁷ A term coined by Robert D. Dale.

¹⁸ Fred B. Craddock, **PREACHING**, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1985, page 46.

¹⁹ Ibid, Peterson, page 64.

All of Pastor Eric’s sermons can be found on the church website at www.eumcnh.org.

Pastor Eric will be preaching again on February 14th, 2010 at both services.