

“Speak O Lord”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 4: 14-30

For some of us, going back home is like slipping on a comfortable robe. It's where things are familiar. It's where people know us without having to ask our name. It's where we can pick up conversations where they left off several months ago, and not have to engage in petty small talk.

For others of us, we can never go back home. It's where everything has changed since the last time we were there, and it's more unsettling than comforting. It's where friends have moved on, family has died or left, and no one really knows our name anymore. It's where bridges have been burned, where relationships are strained, and where we never feel welcome. Some of us can always go home. Others of us can never go home.

And then there is the rest of us, falling somewhere in between. I always look forward to going home, being with my parents, staying at their home, doing fun things with them and our family. But it's also not the same as it used to be. I tend to be introverted by nature, so when I go back home, I'm not proactively looking to see old friends. And some of the relationships I grew up with in the church have changed since my dad retired from active ministry almost ten years ago. It's a reminder to me that while some things may stay the same, more often than not, time will cause things to change significantly whenever we go back home.

You might say Jesus experienced this first-hand in today's story from Luke. Here he was – the boy who had made Nazareth proud – coming back home to renew old acquaintances. This should be a wonderful occasion for him, his family, and all those who helped raise him through childhood to the young adult he is now.

Instead, Jesus is met with anger, hostility, and a desire to push him off a cliff outside of town. Talk about not being able to ever go home again. What's going on here? Why in the world would Jesus' hometown react so violently to the best thing to come out of Nazareth in generations?

William Willimon writes: Now, the Bible is a violent book. That's good, because we are very violent people. But in Luke 4, in Jesus' sermon in Nazareth, the violence is different. All the Gospels agree that from the moment Jesus sets foot in the pulpit, things get nasty. Things were fine in Nazareth until Jesus opened his mouth and all hell broke loose.

And this was only his first sermon! One might have thought that Jesus would have used a more effective rhetorical strategy, would have saved inflammatory speech until he had taken the time to build trust, to win people's affection, to contextualize his message – as we are urged to do in [preaching] classes.

No, instead he threw the book at them, hit them right between the eyes with Isaiah, and jabbed them with First Kings, right to the jaw, left hook. Beaten, but not bowed, the congregation struggled to its feet, regrouped and attempted to throw the preacher off a cliff. And Jesus “went on his way.”

Those of us who have been trained to make rhetorical peace with the congregation marvel at the freedom of Jesus to preach over their heads, to wound in order to heal, to use their own beloved texts against them. Poor preachers. Sometimes we love our people in the name of Christ, enduring just about everything with them, and sometimes we love them by throwing the Book at them. No wonder young Jeremiah resisted when God called him to “speak whatever I command you.” Smart boy, Jeremiah (“Book ‘Em”, The Christian Century, January 27, 2004: 20).

Jesus throws the book at his hometown, but what is it about the book that causes the people to react so violently? Needless to say, it has to do with a radical reframing of how God will act to make his will known in the world. And it does not give his hometown Nazareans the place of honor in God’s new order.

In many ways, you can look at this passage in two parts. The first is when Jesus takes the scroll in the synagogue, and reads from the prophet Isaiah. What’s important to note about this passage that Jesus reads is that it is from Isaiah 61, which was a passage the Jewish people often associated with the coming of the Messiah. This anointed one will “bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free” (4:18). It was a passage directly associated with the notion of Jubilee – “the year of the Lord’s favor.” In other words, it was a big deal!

And what does Jesus say? “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21). Imagine if you were in the synagogue that day in Nazareth, and here was little Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, all grown up. You heard he had gone away, but today he was back and you couldn’t wait to see and hear him. He’s the liturgist for the service, you thought. But then, he switches from being the liturgist to being the preacher. And his first interpretation of the Word is saying that he is the fulfillment of this prophecy. He is the source of the people’s jubilee. He is the promised Messiah. That would be a bit of a shock to the listener, wouldn’t it?

And as if that were not enough, as Willimon said, Jesus then throws the book at his home church. Jesus speaks of two instances in the Old Testament when God came to the outsider, even a nonbeliever, in order to bring about God’s will. In the first instance, Jesus refers to a great draught in the time of Elijah, when there was “severe famine over all the land.” In 1 Kings 17 we learn of Elijah going to none of the “widows of Israel” except to “a widow of Zarephath in Sidon.” God sent Elijah to this house of a nonbeliever. God used Elijah not only to bring food and nourishment to her house, but also to restore to health the widow’s son, who was near death.

In the second instance, Jesus refers to the time of Elisha. In 2 Kings 5, we read of there being leprosy all throughout Israel. But it was Naaman, a great and mighty leader of the Aramean army, who was eventually healed of his leprosy, because Naaman's wife was a Jew, and Elisha was compelled to welcome Naaman into God's grace. In both of these instances, Jesus refers to people in Israel's past who were not part of the family, who were considered outside of God's chosen people. And, in essence, Jesus is saying, "It is to these people, as well, that God has sent me to love and proclaim the gospel."

Now imagine if you were sitting in that synagogue, a life-long Jew, and you heard that? It wouldn't have sat very well at all. Instead of shock, you would have been offended, even enraged. No wonder, then, that we read of the potential violence Jesus faced: "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" (4:29). Not exactly the same as greeting people warmly at the doors of the sanctuary following worship!

David Ostendorf writes: The good news that God bears through Jesus is concurrently jarring news, infuriating news to the temple stalwarts who push him, rush him out of the city to throw him headlong down the hillside. The good news was not the narrative they were used to, not what they expected from the living God, who had come once again to break through their calcified ways.

[As we hear the good news to us today], God gives us an opportunity to respond. We can listen but not hear, hear but not respond, respond but not follow. We can be filled with wrath, as were those in the temple who heard the young, upstart Jesus when he came home and spoke of the new narrative. We can be quietly indifferent. Or we can – indeed we are called to – follow, and by following contribute to that renewing, redeeming narrative that is God's relentlessly powerful story, come alive on the edges of the human family and the faith community.

To follow and to participate in the unfolding of that narrative is also to be open to its costs. It is to be with and to become the outsider. It is to live with the puzzling particularities and with the edge-people through whom God is manifest. It is to risk the journey in the desert, the trek to the Jordan, the headlong plunge down the hillside, the journey to Jerusalem, and the cross (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 308-312).

The Gospel is not something that should only make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. It also should jar us from our comfort, shock us into action, remind us that no one – no one – is outside the realm of possibility of God working to redeem and restore a broken world. And more than anything, it will be painful, it will be challenging, but it will be worth it in the end.

We can pray, "Speak O Lord," but are we always ready to hear what God will speak? We can sing, "Speak O Lord," but are we always prepared for where God's voice will take us? We can say, "Speak O Lord," but are we always willing to listen with God's ears – not our ears – to what God is saying to us?

I believe too often in our personal lives, we are inclined to listen to only the voices that are safe, that make us feel comfortable, that do not challenge us. It might be the relationships we keep, the news we watch, read, or listen to, the activities we engage in, and so on. We don't want to get hurt, we don't want to take a risk, and we don't want to acknowledge we might need to change or grow.

I believe that can also happen to us in the church. We call on God to speak to us and guide us in our mission as Christ's disciples. But when a voice suggests we engage with people who don't look like us or talk like us, or wouldn't "fit in" with us, we discount that voice as crazy, as nuts, as "an outsider." We don't want to get hurt, we don't want to take a risk, and we don't want to acknowledge that we might need to change and grow.

If we are to honestly ask, "Speak O Lord," we must be prepared to listen. We must be willing to discern, to hear, to trust that God has something to say to us. And we believe that through the young man who spoke in a synagogue in Nazareth that day, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing."

In my report for the annual congregational meeting next Sunday, I stated that last year we were intentional listeners. We listened openly and honestly to God and one another, and through that listening we sought to deepen our faith and our bonds of love as the Body of Christ.

As we begin a new year in God's service, I believe we are called to further grow in our ability to listen: listen to one another, listen to our neighbors and our community, listen to what God is calling us to be and do as an Open. Caring. Community. We may not always be prepared for what we hear, and what God has to say to us in those conversations may not always be safe, or easy, or according to our plans. But sometimes that's exactly what we need to hear in order to faithfully follow the one who fulfills the scripture we have heard today.

May we have ears to hear, minds to trust, and hearts to believe. Thanks be to God. Amen.