

Luke 4:16-30

I wonder what the headline was in the Nazareth Post-Dispatch the day after Jesus preached His sermon there. “Favorite Son is Thrown Out of Church?” “Hometown Prophet Angers Local Citizens?” How about, “Preacher Incites Riot; Narrowly Escapes Death?” These were not criminals and murderers who came to hear Jesus preach. They were Nazareth’s finest. They used to be His friends. They were neighbors of Jesus. Some were relatives. For thirty years they had rubbed shoulders with Him. They shopped at the same marketplace. They worshiped in the same synagogue every week. And yet one sermon from His mouth turned them into an angry mob hell-bent on throwing Him off the cliff.

What this means for you is that if Satan can use one sermon to work such hatred and wickedness, God, through one sermon, can work just the opposite in your hearts. The people of Nazareth acted in unbelief, but you are here because of your faith. Do not be caught off guard. Nazareth lives within each one of us, and the devil is watching and waiting for the right time to turn you against the Lord, against His words for you, against the one sent to preach to you. But the devil is not the only one at work. God’s Spirit is here to guard you from the Evil One. He works through the words Jesus puts into your ears to lead you to repent of your sinful life, and to believe that the good news proclaimed here is good news for you.

When Jesus opened the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, He read the words identifying His mission and ministry. And His mission and ministry is as much going on today among you as it was 2,000 years ago. Of the words He read, two are mentioned more than once. One is mentioned twice, and one three times. And these two words set forth exactly what He came to do. I’m going to read what Jesus read to the people of Nazareth...see if you can identify what these two words are. *“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.”* Did you catch them? “Proclaim” is mentioned three times, and “liberty” is mentioned twice. Proclaim means to speak, to announce, to declare. Liberty means to set free, but in the Greek, the word for liberty here is the word that means to forgive. Proclaim and forgive. This is why Jesus came, and this is why Jesus is here today--to proclaim His words to you, and to forgive you, to set you free from your sins.

Now the people of Nazareth did not react well to Jesus’ words because, in their minds and hearts, they were not people in need of forgiveness. They did not need to be set free from anything. They were not captives. They were not blind. They were not oppressed. They were not poor. So when Jesus proclaimed God’s truth to them, they resisted and rejected. This is what unbelief does. It calls the devil’s lies, truth, and it calls God’s truth a lie. And yet God’s words are true no matter what Satan, or Nazareth, or we think about them. And God’s proclamation is that you are poor, having no righteousness of your own; you are captives to sin, death, and the devil; you are blind, for unless God leads you by the hand, you will stumble and fall; and you are oppressed daily by your captors.

Now let’s be honest with each other. The Nazareth within you and me resists hearing this truth. The Nazareth in us is constantly saying, “You’re not all that! Others may be, like school shooters, and terrorists, and the like, but not you.” The Nazareth in us tells us that we can get right with God by doing good things and living right. We really aren’t all that poor. The Nazareth in us tells us that the bonds of sin are not so strong that we can’t break free of them with a little help from God. The Nazareth in us tells us that we can see just fine. We can see our way to God, and we can walk that path if He just nudges us now and then. But God’s truth is not open for debate. What Jesus proclaims

is true even if we do not accept it. And yet, by His grace and His work in you, He puts faith in your heart so that you respond, “Amen! Yes, Lord, You speak the truth.”

For here is the thing...if I do not accept the truth that I am poor, blind, captive, and oppressed by sin and Satan, then I will not have much use for Jesus. The people of Nazareth wanted to dispose of Jesus because they did not believe what God declared about them. The Nazareth in us wants to do the same thing. We may not want to kill the preacher, but the Nazareth in us tunes him out when he gets too personal. It's okay when the sins of others are pointed out, but when my own sins are uncovered, the Nazareth in me reacts poorly. I may stop coming to church. I may stop giving my offering. Or I may come less and give less. I may come, but with my hands over my ears. I may come, yet not to receive, but only to judge.

Friends, the Nazareth in us is strong and powerful, but the mercy of God is greater. Jesus came to Nazareth to proclaim and forgive, and even though they rejected Him, He would not reject them. He walked through that angry mob not because He was unwilling to be put to death; He walked through their midst so that His path would lead Him to Calvary where He would let another angry mob nail Him to a cross. Even though Nazareth hated Him, Jesus would die for them out of pure love. We do not know if any of the people in Nazareth repented of their sins and turned in faith to Jesus and were saved, but we do know that God declared every sinner in Nazareth forgiven for the sake of Jesus.

What was true for Nazareth is also true for you. Because you are like me, I know that you daily resist the truth of God. You daily struggle with sins that capture you. You daily suffer from Satan's oppression. But you have a Savior who comes to set you free. In your baptism He claimed you with the promise that He will never reject you. He already faced the Nazareth that lives in your heart. He conquered it with love by dying for you. Nothing in your past...no sin, no resistance, no rejection of Jesus can prevent Him from forgiving you. He proclaims it, and so it is the truth. You, dear sinner, are forgiven. The devil denies it, but God declares it. It is the truth.

This year, says Jesus, is the year of the Lord's favor. 2013? Yes, for every time God brings you to His house and places His word of grace into your ears, it is the time, the year of His favor. This means that God accepts you...not because you are so acceptable; not because you aren't that bad of a sinner. He accepts you, not in spite of your sins, but because of them. He accepts you because He is merciful. Merciful, not just to others; merciful to you. God's favor rests upon you because Jesus died for you. God's hands are open to you because Jesus opened His hands to be nailed to a cross for you.

This year, this day, right now as Jesus' words are coming into your ears, God is not up in heaven judging you; He is smiling upon you. His face is turned toward you, and it is a face full of love because He sees you only through the cross of His Son. He sees you as you are, as He proclaims and declares to be the truth. He sees you in Jesus, loved and forgiven. Amen.