

January 31, 2010

Epiphany 4

"Jesus' Hometown People Rejected Him"

LUKE 4:20-32

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. ²³ 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.'" ²⁴ "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed-- only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. ³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. ³¹ Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. ³² They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.

Have you ever stepped into a yellow jacket's nest? I have. I can still see the swarm of bees coming out of the gopher hole. Within seconds they were attacking every part of my body. Someone recently said that yellow jackets don't sting, but they bite. In fact they sting and they bite. They keep on stinging again and again unlike the honey bee that only stings once. These bees are mean and they want to hurt you as much as they can, especially if you disturb their nest.

Our Lord Jesus stepped into a bee's nest when he began preaching to people in his hometown of Nazareth. They were like angry yellow jackets whose nest had been just disturbed. This was the carpenter's son whom they loved, yet they drove Jesus out of the synagogue. And they dragged to the edge of the town and wanted to throw him over the cliff head first so he would suffer great pain and even die.

Why did Jesus make the people of his hometown so angry? You will recall from our sermon last week that Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read words from the prophet Isaiah about the Messiah that said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." Then Jesus applied these words to himself, openly confessing and proclaiming he was the Messiah. He dared to tell the people he was their Lord and God and they needed to trust in him for salvation. He even dared to compare their rejection of him to the way people of the past rejected prophets like Elijah and Elisha.

In these last days in which we are living, if you talk to people about Jesus and proclaim

the truth that he is our Lord and God, you will stir up a hornet's nest. You will make them angry. They may not try to throw you over a cliff, but they will politely let you know that they want nothing to do with you. Jesus said that you will be hated for his name's sake.

Jesus saw their rejection

Jesus knew exactly what they people were really thinking when he read to them in the synagogue. After he finished reading from Isaiah the prophet, he rolled up the scroll and said "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." It says that people spoke well of him, and that they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. They were saying nice things about Jesus, but deep down inside they resented that he claimed to be someone more than the carpenter's son. Can't you hear them saying to each other? "Isn't he wonderful?" "Don't you love his words?" "Isn't he a nice young man?" But they did not want him as their Lord and God.

This past week Apple revealed its new I-Pad, a combination of tablet computer and I-Phone. Steve Jobs is a master at bringing people together and showing them his new product so that they say "ooh" and "aah" like a crowd at the fireworks on the 4th of July. There were lots of oohs and aahs in Nazareth that Sabbath day when the crowd was amazed at how their home town boy Jesus had become so famous. They said to each other, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" They could not grasp how this Jesus they had known since he was a child could possibly proclaim himself as their Lord and God. Oh, they loved the carpenter's son who helped his dad in the carpenter shop, who was so loving and kind to his mother Mary, who was a model for other kids in their town, but their stomachs turned and they felt like vomiting when he told them he was their Lord and God. Matthew 13 tells us the people of Nazareth said, "Where did this man get his wisdom and these miraculous powers? 'Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where did this man get all these things?"

I am holding in my hand a book that was handed to my wife with the title, "The Greatest Man that Ever Lived." It is a book about Jesus produced by the Watchtower Society. It proclaims Jesus as a great man, the greatest man that ever lived, a created being, but not Lord and God from all eternity.

Jesus knew what was in their hearts. He could see behind the smiles and friendly faces, and the oohs and the aahs. That is why he told them, "Surely you will quote the proverb to me; 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard you did in Capernaum.'" They wanted Jesus to start performing miracles in Nazareth just as he did in Capernaum.

This past week, while traveling home from the California pastors' conference, I met a very successful business man who was coming home from a trade show in Las Vegas. He lives in a suburb of Phoenix, close to Lamb of God Lutheran Church, our WELS Church in south Phoenix. When he found out that I was a pastor, he said that he and his wife were religious and spiritual but they wanted to practice their religion on their own terms. By nature human beings do not want God on his terms as set down in the Bible. They do not want Jesus to be their Lord and God as was the case with the people in Nazareth. They

do not want Jesus as their Savior, because they have this homemade and home brewed religion inside of their hearts that says "I can save myself by the quality of life that I live."

Just think of where you would be this morning if it were not for God's grace. God's amazing grace has led you to believe with your heart and confess with your lips that Jesus is your Lord God. You and I would be like these people sitting in the synagogue in Nazareth, saying nice things about Jesus on the outside, but burning with anger on the inside as he tells us he is the Messiah our Lord and God. If it were not for God's grace that changed our hearts, we would join the crowd that dragged Jesus to the edge of town and wanted to throw him over the cliff.

Jesus helped them see their rejection

Jesus saw their rejection. He saw the hornets rising from their nest, ready to do whatever they could to hurt him. So, what does Jesus do? He gives their nests an extra kick to arouse their anger even more, because he loved them and wanted them to come to know the truth about him.

Listen now to how Jesus speaks the truth in love to them and confronts their false faith and rejection of him. "I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe drought in the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in the region of Sidon." The Lord called Elijah the prophet to tell the people of Israel they were wrong for thinking they could worship the Lord in the morning and worship the false god Baal in the evening. Did the people of Israel say, "Oh, thank you for telling us that our religion of worshiping God in the morning and Baal in the evening is wrong?" I don't think so. Elijah stepped into a hornet's nest and gave it an extra kick when he told them how wrong they were. The people hated him for telling them their religion was wrong. And when it came time to run away from wicked Jezebel and hide during a terrible drought, the Lord chose to send him to the home of a widow in Zarephath, the heathen region along the coast of the Mediterranean. The Lord bypassed the widows in Israel, and chose a widow from a heathen area to take care of Elijah.

We love that story of Elijah being cared for by this poor widow lady. He comes to her town and sees her gathering sticks to make a fire. He asks her for food to eat, and she tells him she is gathering sticks to make her last little bit of flour and oil for a few tortillas that she can eat with her son before they die for lack of food. Elijah tells her not to worry, but to share the food with him and the Lord would care for them. Every day there was more flour and more oil to care for them. When her son died, the prophet Elijah even raised him to life again.

The people of Nazareth had heard this wonderful story many times in their lives. Now Jesus using that story to teach that they were rejecting the truth about him as their Lord and God just as the people of Israel rejected the prophet Elijah for telling them the truth.

Jesus will not let his people of Nazareth continue to reject him in unbelief. He kicks their nest another time, and now you can really hear them buzz in anger. He tells another story well known to every child who ever went to the synagogue with their parents. "And there

were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, only Naaman the Syrian." The people of Israel hated Elisha as much as they hated Elijah. Remember how the young boys taunted Elijah with the words, "Go up you bald head, go up." The Lord sent two bears out of the woods to tear into these gang members who hated the Lord and his prophet just as much as their parents did. The Lord reached out to a heathen man in Syria to heal him of his leprosy because his own people had rejected him.

Did the people of Nazareth get the message? They sure did. "All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of town, and took him to the brow of a hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff." I can almost hear the parents in Nazareth warning their children to stay away from the steep cliff and not fall over the edge or you might hit your head on the sharp rocks and die. These people who grew up with Jesus dragged him to this cliff and they want to throw him down the cliff with the hope he would hit his head and die.

Jesus did not give up. He did not give up on his hometown people who rejected him. He kept on preaching and teaching. The next Sabbath day he taught in the synagogue in Capernaum. People were amazed at his teaching, just as much as they were in Nazareth. And Jesus kept on telling people how he was their Lord and God and how he had come to save them. Jesus did not give up on these people when they rejected him. He reached out to them just as he reaches out to you and me. He comes to us as he did with his doubting disciple Thomas. He showed him the nail marks in his hands and let him touch the spear wound in his side. He overcomes our rejection and unbelief and leads us to say, "My Lord and my God." "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Amen.