

“The Uncomfortable Pew – Part 2” – Luke 4:21-30

“Previously, on NCIS ...” That’s how the second program in a two-part episode on my favourite TV series begins, setting up a quick review of what happened last week in case you missed it, or like most people, forgot what happened last week.

“Previously, here at Central ...” Those of you who were here last week may recall that I preached on a passage from Luke that fits immediately ahead of today’s reading. In fact, the two readings overlap by one verse – the final verse last week and the opening verse this week: Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Just to help you come up to speed if you weren’t here, let’s do a quick review, just like on NCIS.

Jesus has recently been baptized, signaling his entry into adulthood. He has spent time in the wilderness, preparing for his calling. Apparently he has also spent some time in Capernaum doing things that have gotten him noticed and for which word has spread to Nazareth. And now he has come back to his home town, the “local boy made good” and is the featured preacher at the Synagogue on the Sabbath. He is handed the scroll of Isaiah, and reads one of the “Suffering Servant” passages – “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour...” He then refolds the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down.

“The eyes of all were upon him” the text told us, and with that simple yet eloquent statement the picture settles and becomes clear. A powerful silence has descended upon the crowd in the synagogue, as everyone holds their breath, anxious to hear what words of wisdom and insight will come next. This is the moment they have been waiting for; what will he preach about this text? Will it be something very orthodox, very standard? Will it be a new insight into what the prophet Isaiah had to say?

Instead it was none of the above. With what was surely clear understanding of what he meant, Jesus simply declared, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The reaction of the crowd seemed friendly enough, as we are told “all spoke well of him” and “isn’t this Joseph’s son?” But somehow what seemed like a friendly reaction apparently wasn’t, because Jesus immediately launches into them with a blistering tirade which is not only intended to offend them but does so. Perhaps if we hear the crowd’s reaction with a different tone we might begin to understand why Jesus tore into them. Let’s hear that sentence again, this time with the snooty airs of a crowd of elite society, champagne glasses in hand, who have just heard a pronouncement from the assistant grounds-keeper: “all spoke well of him – well lah-di-dah!” and “isn’t that the carpenter’s boy? – who’d have thought he could read?” I think once we hear it in those tones we can begin to understand why Jesus reacted the way he did, although I think there’s another equally good reason that will come clear in a bit.

Whatever the reason, Jesus’ reaction is pretty clear, isn’t it? He snarks at the crowd, starting with the reference to the saying “physician, heal thyself,” mentioning his works in Capernaum, and charging them with the accusation that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.” That last bit, about the prophet, was a clear signal that by their own rejection of him they were themselves declaring him to be a prophet – not the best way to win friends and reconcile with neighbours. But as if that weren’t clear enough to offend them, Jesus goes on to provide two examples of how two of the most revered prophets displayed their powers and provided the grace of God not to faithful Jews but to foreigners.

This was too much for the good people in the synagogue to bear, and they reacted pretty much how you’d expect – they were filled with rage, dragged this cheeky heretic out of the

synagogue, out of town, and up onto the hill where they tried – unsuccessfully, of course – to kill him.

Wow! What just happened? How did we get here so fast? How did we so quickly get from Jesus being blessed by the voice of God at his baptism and from his triumph over evil and temptation in the desert to almost being killed by the good folks in the congregation?? Oh sure, we can understand that we often fail to see the spectacular in the familiar people around us until they become world-famous, and even then we're all, "I knew her/him when .." But how can we begin to make any sense out of this episode?

I think perhaps we can begin to understand this episode a bit better if we step back a bit and recall which gospel this is – the gospel according to Luke. Both Mark and Matthew have a similar episode, but both of them have it occurring much, much later in Jesus' ministry. Either it happened twice – highly unlikely! – or Luke has moved the event to a much earlier time. Why would he do that; why would Luke play "fast and loose" with the chronology of events? Surely he must have had a deliberate reason for doing so, and I think the reason fits with all of what Luke had to say.

Each of the gospel writers had a particular theme about God's action in Jesus that they wanted to emphasize; for example Matthew's driving theme was that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, and that theme influenced much of his writing. Luke's driving theme was that God's action in Jesus was not only for the Jews but for all of humanity – "Jerusalem, Judea, and unto the ends of the earth" is how he put it. Given that perspective perhaps we can see a hint of how some of the early Gentile Christians apparently felt, namely a confusion and even a charge that the Jews had rejected their own Messiah; that they (the Gentiles) could see clearly that Jesus was the Son of God while his own people couldn't. And of course the closing verses in which the good townsfolk of Nazareth were unable to kill Jesus adds to Luke's assertion that this Jesus was truly the Son of God, and mere people could neither stop him nor divert him from fulfilling the divine path that God had set him upon to bring reconciliation and redemption to all people.

And there is the thrust of the whole episode, as confused as it may have gotten through Luke's colourful storytelling capabilities. Jesus, although dismissed by his own home-town people, was recognized by the rest of the world as being the One selected by God to enact a new covenant between God and people, a covenant that extended not only to those born into a particular faith but to all people of all races and nations who would place their faith in Christ. The message here is that God's grace is offered to all people, a message that itself has been validated through being recognized all around the globe. We who are gathered here this morning are ourselves validation of that message, for we too are recipients of that grace and participants in that covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation.

It seems a good message to hear and to grasp especially on this Sunday which is designated Presbyterian World Service & Development (PWS&D) Sunday. PWS&D is the arm of our denomination that acts as Christ's hands in the larger global community, offering relief from hunger, disease, and homelessness to people throughout the world. Your gifts are matched and quadrupled, and by virtue of the most cost-efficient organization in the field provide much-needed help not only to victims of disasters both human and natural but provide much-needed hope to people who struggle and work incredibly hard to provide a living for themselves and their loved ones. These are people who need to hear God's grace not merely in words but in the actions of those of us who have heard and believed Jesus, the living Word of God, declare and fulfill that prophecy, "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."