

Luke 4: 14-30
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On His Way

Last week we left Jesus still dripping from his baptism with the voice of God ringing in his and our ears: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”¹ After Luke tells us that Jesus is now 30 years old as he begins his public ministry, the gospel writer offers his version of Jesus’ genealogy, a list of ancestors that traces Jesus’ family tree back to Adam, “son of God.” Luke then tells us that Jesus is both filled with the Holy Spirit and driven by that same Spirit into the wilderness where he goes without food for 40 days. As that time winds down, the devil goads Jesus to swap all that he has been born to do for a loaf of bread, power over human kingdoms, and a chance to see if angels will indeed swoop in if he takes a swan dive off the top of the Temple. Of course, Jesus resists each offer and clarifies who and whose he is. Luke concludes his account of Jesus’ time of temptation by telling the reader, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”² [Read Luke 4:14-22]

Going home is often a complicated thing. Jesus’ homecoming is no different. He heads to the synagogue, a place of study and prayer, as he has done countless times before. In Jesus’ day, Nazareth was not a big place. One scholar describes it as “flyover country,” a town of 400-500 people located at a good distance from anywhere of much importance.³ So when word reaches Nazareth that Jesus is creating a buzz in the surrounding towns, they are excited to welcome him home. Jesus steps up and reads from Isaiah 61, sort of. What he reads is not word

¹ Luke 3: 22, NRSV

² Luke 4: 13, NRSV

³ <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-622-jesus-sermon-at-nazareth/>

for word what you'll find if you turn to it in your pew bible, but it is very close. He is claiming these words from Isaiah as his mission statement. This call will shape his life and ministry. As the Voice translation reads:

The Eternal designated Me

to be His representative to the poor, to preach good news to them.

He sent Me to tell those who are held captive that they can now be set free,
and to tell the blind that they can now see.

He sent Me to liberate those held down by oppression.

In short, the Spirit is upon Me to proclaim that now is the time;

this is the jubilee season of the Eternal One's grace.⁴

These words are familiar ones. We spent some time in Isaiah 61 in Advent, exploring this call to the community to be one that embraces this work. It is still our call; it remains our work. And, we need help. The people in Nazareth need help, too. Like the crowds gathered on the banks of the Jordan last week, they are living under Roman oppression; they are longing for a new way, a new One who can do the holy work of setting things right. And lo and behold, Joseph's boy seems like he may just be the one to do that, and it sounds like they get to be a part of it. No one seems to mind Jesus' missing a few words. They don't even flinch when he declares that the reading is fulfilled in their hearing. In fact, that may make their chests puff up a bit more. They are a part of this Jesus thing. He is one of them. Then things take a turn. [Read Luke 4: 23-30]

⁴ Luke 4:18-19, The Voice

Every year, the seventh grade at my school took a week-long outdoor education trip. It was a rite of passage, a thing of legend. We would spend three nights in cabins at a camp outside of Nashville. Then we would hike into the woods to sleep in tents for two nights and roast chickens over campfires we built in small groups. I'm sure we did more than that, but those are the things I remember, especially my group's chicken that was raw in the middle and beyond crispy on the outside which led to its being pitched into the nearby stream and our being blasted by the adult leaders for our complete disregard for the environment and utter incompetence. I remember that and the rappelling. We had to rappel off a tower at the camp and then off a cliff later in the week. And I failed miserably. I'm still not a fan of heights. Take me on a hike and I will be the one standing as far away as I can get from every overlook or outcropping. I was required to climb the tower, and I managed to finally take that crucial step backwards and climb down as I was carefully belayed by attentive faculty members. When we arrived at the cliff, I froze. I could not bring myself to climb up. Thankfully, no one made me. So it will come as no surprise that the last place I belong is on a cliff or a brow of a hill.

Every time I read this text I want to press pause and nudge Jesus to leave well enough alone. Can't you just be nice to the Nazareth folks over coffee and donuts and go on your way? Apparently not. We don't know why he begins to share what he does about God's freedom to include those outside the tent, the Holy Spirit's determination to bring good news to the poor whose names we do not know and to liberate people who speak a different language or even worship in a different way. The widow you may recall is from Sidon, the home turf of Elijah's fiercest enemy. Jezebel, the Queen commanded hundreds of prophets and worshipped Baal, and God had the nerve in the midst of a famine to heal that foreign woman's child on Jezebel's

home turf. And as if that isn't enough, Jesus reminds them of the story of Naaman, the Syrian—again an outsider and a foreigner—who is healed when the prophet Elisha leads him to wash in the waters of the Jordan. Jesus can't leave well enough alone, and now in the span of one verse, the congregation is not just stunned or miffed or ruffled, but “filled with rage”—enough rage to fuel their drive to pitch him off a cliff. And as much as I detest the thought of climbing any cliff anywhere, I confess that I can imagine giving into the temptation to get swept up in their contagious, viral rage, too.

Jesus has just come from his head-to-head confrontation with temptation in the wilderness. He turned down and turned away from easy sustenance, earthly power, and the suggestion that he test God's love for him by pitching himself off the top of the Temple. He has already been on a cliff; he left that one on his own terms, too. And as tempting as it may be, he does not try to reason with the hometown crowd; he does not try to talk them down when they grow outraged at the idea that he is one of them and yet not strictly one of theirs. He does not spend his breath explaining that he is not simply born to save them, that his ministry and his kingdom and his saving ways extend far beyond the bounds of his hometown, far beyond *any* human limits. Instead, he goes on *his* way back down from the cliff and leaves them stuck and stewing in their rage.

I like to imagine that at least a few are curious enough to take a deep breath and tag along as Jesus makes *his* way out of town. Maybe that's because I dread the thought of being left on the cliff. This cliff terrifies me more than any other, because when I get swept up in my rage, I am stuck. I do not possess the ability to get myself down safely, and I risk missing what the Holy Spirit is up to with Jesus beyond what I can see or even imagine.

I came across a painting entitled *The Brow of the Hill Near Nazareth* by the artist James Tissot this week that I shared with my newsletter article and on social media. After a return to his faith later in life, Tissot spent ten years painting scenes from the life of Jesus. This scene shows hundreds of figures climbing a rocky path that looms over a valley below while a few figures in the foreground gesture dramatically with angry expressions on their faces. I kept playing a church version of *Where's Waldo?* with this painting. I kept looking for Jesus, thinking I had missed him. But that's just it: he is not there.⁵ The moment Tissot captures comes after Jesus has gone on *his* way. I can look and look and look. I will not find him there. He is not on the brow of the hill near Nazareth; I will not find Jesus on that cliff.

As I have said before, rage is not necessarily unfaithful. Rage that rails against the discarding of the lost and the least and the overlooked is a holy thing, especially when it spurs us to action seeking to right wrongs, fueling us to address the things that break God's heart. That's where Jesus is after all. Throughout Luke's gospel we will find Jesus seeking the lost, welcoming the outsider, breaking bread with those whom others avoid or condemn. That is exactly where he goes next in Luke's gospel and where he is even now. Jesus is not in the crowd stewing in its own outrage. He is not soothing egos or smoothing feathers. He is weeping with the grieving, embracing the outcast, challenging those who trample and trounce others just because they can, giving sight to the blind, and setting free everyone bound by any kind of chain.

A crowd will turn on Jesus again, of course, which will lead him to a cross perched on a different hill. But for now, Jesus has work to do, places to go, and people to save. He has roads

⁵ <https://thevcs.org/open-unexpected#brow-hill>

to travel, demons to cast out, and prodigals to welcome home. And by the grace of God, that is where I hope to go, too. I pray for the wisdom and the courage not to get stuck stewing on this cliff or any other. With God's help, I will follow where Jesus leads and join him on *his* way.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.