

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

MAY HE PASS THROUGH US

Luke 4:21-30

4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

21Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" 24And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They 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. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Diagnosis: Cutting Deep

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Touchy Jesus?*

This is one of those encounters where reactions seem to be out of proportion. The crowd seems to be quite favorably impressed with Jesus. They are “amazed” at his “gracious words” (v. 22). With what could be wonder, they ask, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” It’s as if they are saying, “How did this man get to be such a powerful preacher?” But then, apparently from out of nowhere, Jesus seems to fly off the handle! “Doubtless you will quote for me this proverb... no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” (v. 24). And then the reminders of how God’s prophets of old ministered to the outsiders, the unclean Gentiles, and not the insiders, the people of Israel, in times of need. What’s going on here? There’s definitely something unusual happening, something that likely will lead to great consternation: If Jesus gets so defensive at a seemingly positive remark, how can I count on him with the really dark stuff of life?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Touching a Nerve!*

Of course, the reactionary spirit gets amplified by the gathered assembly. Jesus presents them with perfectly legitimate lessons from the Scriptures, and they try to throw him off a cliff. But now we start to see why Jesus reacted the way he did. The crowds are so angry because he is pointing out to them God’s ancient track record of reaching out beyond the “righteous” community to the unclean nations. Jesus saw that their question, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” was really a claim of ownership. “He’s one of ours! Imagine what a boon this will be to us! People will come from all over Israel to see Nazareth’s hometown hero!” Bringing up God’s judgment on Israel and blessing of foreigners struck a nerve, because they were seeking to put Jesus in their own little box—blessings and benefits for them, not for others.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *He Goes On His Way*

Such an attempt to grasp hold of God as an object, for our own blessing or advantage over others, is idolatry writ large. The living God will not be constrained by our selfishness. And so, Jesus goes on his way (v. 30), one quite different from their way. He leaves them. Their attempt to bind Jesus to themselves, and Jesus' refusal to comply, results in their rejection of him but, more importantly, his rejection of them. So it is for us, when we seek to claim God as our possession, our hometown hero: Jesus rejects such claims and claimants, leaving us forsaken. We are cut off from God.

Prognosis: Digging Deeper Still

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *He Passed through the Midst of Them*

It almost sounds like a passing-over, doesn't it? Although they are rejected, they are not without hope. Their hope—and ours—is found exactly in the very fact that so outraged the Nazareth crowd in the first place: in Christ, God delights in granting mercy to unrighteous outsiders. In wrath, we are cut off from God. But by grace, God reaches out to those who are cut-off. If this story places us in the shoes of the unrighteous people of Nazareth, it also makes us the very people for whom Christ died.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Are Claimed*

The attempt to put our exclusive claim on Christ ends only with God's wrath. But Christ's exclusive claim on us, as sinners, ends in joy and peace. Joy and peace were notably absent from the Nazareth synagogue. They are, however, abundantly real when sinners know that God sent Christ to save the outsider, the unholy, and the unrighteous. We can indeed entrust ourselves, our whole selves, to Christ. He is not unpredictably ready to cast us off at a moment's notice; he has come, eagerly, into this world to die for us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Touching Others*

Now, in our amazement at Christ's gracious words for us, we can welcome with delight God's intention to save the outsider and the unrighteous. Rather than try to keep Jesus all to ourselves, we can give ourselves joyfully to the Holy Spirit's work of speaking the gracious Word of Christ, the Word of cross and empty tomb, to a world in dire need. We can pray that Jesus will take us with him on his way and pass, through us, into that world.