

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

FAMILIARITY BRINGS SALVATION

Luke 4:21-30

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

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: Familiarity Breeds Contempt

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Too Good to Be True*

Jesus' visit to his hometown seemed to be going beautifully (4:14-21), until some people remembered that they knew Jesus' (questionable) lineage (v. 22): Could the son of a craftsman, whose formal religious training was unknown, actually be such a persuasive preacher? (Dare it be asked; "Was Jesus even really the son of Joseph?" "Don't you remember all that secrecy around his birth?") Was his powerful sermon the fluke of a charismatic amateur? Was it possible that Jesus' eloquent words had broken down their defenses, and left them vulnerable to what just might be blasphemy: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Too Familiar to Be True*

Jesus anticipates his hometown listeners' skepticism. After all, the people of Israel have a bad track record for trusting God's messengers—let alone God's message. No prophet has been welcomed in his hometown (which indicates two things: Jesus is at least on par with God's prophets, and hometown folk tend to be less receptive to God's messengers than others are). So Jesus goes on to recount how God didn't even bother to send Elijah or Elisha to their hometowns—let alone home regions. Instead, they were sent to the nations (vv. 26-27). Lack of faith on the part of Jesus' hometown neighbors is their problem; God has mercy to administer, whether they are receptive to it or not. And their rage, and scheme to throw Jesus off the side of a hill, seems to indicate that they are not receptive to him.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Incurable Hearing Loss*

But the problem for Nazareth (and other contemptuous hearers of

God's promises) is worse than that. It's not just that they will not now be graced by Jesus' presence. The problem is that they are rejecting the "Son of God," with whom God is well pleased (3:22). Jesus is no mere prophet; he is God's messiah. In fact, when Jesus quotes the proverb, "Doctor cure yourself" (v. 23), anticipating Nazareth's hostility, he is also anticipating a worse rejection: His death on the cross. For it is from the cross that Jesus hears his people's fullest renunciation: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" (23:35). And those who believe that God's messiah couldn't possibly choose mercy over self-preservation, sadly have no cure for themselves. They are incurably lost. Deaf to God's good news, God turns a deaf ear to them.

PROGNOSIS: Familiarity Brings Salvation

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Who You Hear Is What You Get*

But here's the real surprise: This Messiah, who chooses not to save himself, in order that he might save others, does—unexpectedly (see 22:42)—cure himself. In fact, the crucifixion that takes his life, not only saves us sinners, but it demonstrates his obedience to God's true purpose and wins him resurrection. That resurrection also proves the claim that Jesus makes in his hometown synagogue: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). In Jesus—the once dimple-faced, now grown-up boy of Mary and Joseph—God embodies his longed-for jubilee. Jesus not only heals, releases, and gives sight to the blind, but his good news is even meant to recover familiar doubters and skeptics from their deafness to his announcement that he is anointed to fulfill God's will.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Problem) : *So Familiar—and True*

Now that's the kind of news that can perk up tired ears. Even we

Christians, whose ears have grown all-too-familiar with Jesus' announcement, are jarred from complacency. He heals our hearing, wipes out the debt of our skepticism, and creates a jubilee that not only puts us right with God, but with our neighbor. We stop guarding ourselves against being called gullible believers, and brazenly hang our hopes on the familiar, but truly anointed, Son of God. We trust that not only does he plan to fulfill God's desires for us, but for other less familiar faces also.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Problem) : *Too Good Not to Be True*

It's been said that "familiarity breeds contempt," but that adage fails when it comes to Jesus the Christ. Instead, his familiarity with us, and his ongoing insistence (call it, Word and Sacrament) on being in our lives, breeds faith in us. It's a faith that not only re-opens us to God, but it opens us up to all those strangers who walk into our familiar places. Could these strangers be the likes of the widow of Zarephath, or Naaman the Leper? For if God's jubilee in Christ is meant to open us up to God, then we shouldn't be surprised to see God bless these others with his good news—despite our (former) biases. In fact, we may just go looking for those "foreigners," not only in our pews, but in the (gay and straight) bars, malls, Goodwill stores, and third-world refugee camps of our world.