

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, 2010  
Luke 4:21-30  
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

We read the first part of this Gospel passage last Sunday. In the first part, Luke told us that at early in his earthly ministry, Jesus went to his hometown, Nazareth, and was in town over the Sabbath. Custom required that visiting rabbis be invited to read and to preach. The synagogue invited Jesus to do so. He read from the prophet Isaiah. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." When Jesus started to comment on this passage, he began by saying, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The prophecy that Jesus read from Isaiah was a prophecy of the Messiah. In the synagogue that day in Nazareth, Jesus announced that he was the Messiah. He claimed the mantle of messiahship for himself. At first, the people of Nazareth were excited. Jesus was a hometown boy, and he was already building a reputation as a healer. But as our Lord continued his commentary on Isaiah's prophecy, the people became angry. What was Jesus saying? Were they to be excluded? Did the messiah come for others but not for them? Anger turned to rage and the crowd wanted to kill Jesus then and there. As Saint Luke related the episode, Jesus barely escaped with his life.

What is this all about? Certainly at one level, the literary level, Saint Luke was setting the stage for his account of the life of Jesus. He was introducing his theme. First he told us that Jesus was the Messiah, which was the point of last week's Gospel. In today's reading, Luke informs us that the Messiah comes but does not compel. Accepting him is a matter of choice, and from Luke's perspective, the Jewish people chose to turn their backs on Jesus. Indeed, Luke will tell us, they more than turned their backs. They killed God's Word. They murdered Jesus. This is a theme that is strong in the Gospels and a theme for which Jewish people have long paid a price. But, the Lord's rejection by his own people is a reality. And, Jesus had a point when he said no prophet is acceptable in his own country. The point is that of familiarity and expectation. Our Lord's people had great expectations of a messiah, of what he would be like, of what he would do. In this incident in Nazareth, what Jesus said about himself was not what the people wanted to hear. So, excitement and expectation turned to anger and rejection.

What we need to take away from this story is that when God comes to us, he comes on his terms and not ours. God, in Christ, through the working of the Holy Spirit, seeks each and every day to reach through our blinders to enlighten, to awaken us to the reality of those things about us that stand in the way of God's love. He asks us to trust him by following him and him alone, by letting go of those things to which we clutch in a misguided attempt to enrich ourselves by holding back from the good which is God. Letting go feels frightening. Letting go and letting God take and direct our lives seems risky. It feels safer to set the terms for ourselves, to have it our way. When we do this,

we are rejecting the Messiah. When we do it, we are trying to kill off the good that God would do in our lives and through our lives. When we do, we have joined our Savior's hometown crowd. *Amen.*