

## Jesus' Inaugural Address: Part 2

Last week we looked at the first portion of Luke 4 which is usually set off in most Bibles under the subtitle “the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth”. We considered that first portion, verses 14-20, as comparable to an inaugural address where our new president tells the nation his hopes and plans for his administration—what he feels he was elected to do. We also mentioned how that is often a rosy picture—more of a vision—than a pragmatic or realistic portrait of what can be accomplished. Luke chooses to begin his account of Jesus’ public ministry with Jesus entering the synagogue where he grew up, taking a scroll and reading scripture. We halted our reading with the information that after he had read the passage from Isaiah, he sat down and with the eyes of all present upon him, declared “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This is the opening line of the sermon Jesus will preach. Jesus is saying that he has come to bring the good news for which they have been waiting—after all they are the poor. They have been living under the oppressive rule of Rome, imprisoned under a rule where the true practice of their faith was made difficult since Rome proclaimed the emperor was not only king but God and should be worshiped. The villagers have heard reports of the healings Jesus has done in neighboring villages. So the first response to Jesus’ declaration is found in verse 22: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” This seems an auspicious beginning. The better Greek translation for spoke well of him, would be they were testifying to him or witnessing to him. Jesus has begun by saying something his audience wanted to hear. Change was coming which would benefit them. They were ready to join this movement or at least felt that it was good news for them. Perhaps there would be a little reflected glory for them because they were from his hometown. Perhaps there would be some favorable outcomes for their situations. After all wasn’t this the son of Joseph whom they had known throughout his boyhood? If this was what he came to do, wouldn’t it benefit them? But the next words of Jesus must have been like having a bucket of cold water dumped on them. Verse 23 tells us that Jesus understands their expectations. In order to fully appreciate what Jesus sees in their response I am using a different translation than the NRSV for this verse. Young’s literal translation was done in the 1800’s and is exactly that; a literal translation. This means it often does not read as smoothly as others in English. But the literal translations reads this way: “And he said unto them, 'Certainly ye will say to me this simile, Physician, heal thyself; as great things as we heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country;' In other words, we have heard the reports of what you have done elsewhere...surely since we are your hometown we also deserve healings and great things to be done here. Jesus’ response, as it is so often in Luke, was to quote to them the stories from their Scriptures about the deeds of prophets God had previously sent to them. Jesus reminds them that during the drought which affected Israel in the time of Elijah, God sent Elijah to a widow in Sidon. The second story Jesus reminds them of is that of Naaman, a Syrian army general with leprosy. Most of us are only vaguely familiar with these stories, if at all. But Jesus’ audience in that synagogue knew them well. Everyone there knew that the widow and Naaman to whom God reached out were heathens, not Israelites. They were foreigners, even enemies. One was a woman and the other was a leper. Jesus points out what his audience knew about both these stories...God’s grace passed by the in-group and went outside the line—crossed the barriers—

to someone not like them. To make it even clearer Jesus also reminds them there were many widows in Israel that Elijah could have helped as well as many Jewish lepers Elisha could have healed. Instead, these stories of their own tradition point out that God's love went to the outsider. By telling these two stories, Jesus announces to the congregation that God was not their private Diety. God actually loves all those heathens. God loves all those foreigners. It seems as long as anyone can remember, people have used God to draw lines between "us" and "them". We just love to imagine that God is on our side of that line. We also love to use that line to pass judgment on those on the other side. Jesus' world also included a lot of these "us" and "them" lines. There were lines between Jew and Gentile, lines between old pagans and new philosophers, lines between men and women, lines between Romans and everybody else, lines between slave and free. Lots and lots of lines dividing the world. In this short, oblique little sermon, Jesus announces two things. First, though we may draw our little or big lines between "us" and "them", God pays no attention to those lines. Secondly, and at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus announces that he plans on crossing all the "us" and "them" lines quite freely. Jesus, the One we name Lord and Savior, said No to the lines in his very first sermon. He preached this good news in his hometown and even there, they didn't like it. In fact, that's exactly what gets his audience so enraged that they chase him out of town with the intention of throwing him off a nearby cliff. Although it was not a popular message, it evidently was memorable because someone wrote it down. We've had 2000 years for it to sink in, but it seems we still like to draw our lines. This text was the subject of the sermon at the Presbytery worship service last Saturday by Rev. Heather Wood Davis of First Presbyterian Church in Newton. In her sermon on the text she used a quote that I have heard often in sermons and during various courses on pastoral duties. I have no idea where the phrase originated, but it goes like this: The preacher's task is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Somehow the first part of that is always more appealing than the latter. Like the citizens of Nazareth we often seek our own comfort and seem to be blind to the plight of others. We like to draw lines which separate us from those not like us. Like them we need to be reminded that Scripture is more concerned about how we live our lives in relationship to God and others than about our individual wants and desires for a comfortable life. Facebook has many postings on it about faith and religion which are trivial. I really don't think that liking a posting proclaiming anything about God will bring blessings as some claim. Posting only requires a small movement of your finger. It does not show commitment to the life of discipleship desired by God. However, occasionally I see a post which reminds me of something important about Jesus and his mission to this broken world. The one I have in mind said: The requirements of Jesus for discipleship are very different from the conditions needed for salvation. Our salvation is a gift of grace from God through Jesus' ministry. Our discipleship is how we live into those things Jesus proclaimed in that first inaugural sermon given to us in the gospel of Luke. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.