

Today's scripture begins in the middle of a story in the Gospel of Luke, so if you were confused, or if you aren't quite sure what this passage was all about, have no fear.

We'll go over what Jesus did and why his followers were praising him in verse 22, and then wanted to throw him off a cliff by verse 29.

Now, part of the reason this passage might be hard to understand, is because it's a reaction to an event that we don't actually hear about in this set of scriptures.

Just before the sequence of events that we heard, Jesus goes to the temple in his hometown of Nazareth and reads from the Torah scroll.

He reads a famous passage from the prophet Isaiah that says,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4: 18-19)

These are verses 18 and 19 of Luke chapter 4, and our story picked up on verse 21.

So, upon hearing him read in the temple, his hometown community is wicker impressed and surprised.

They ask each other, *“Is this not Joseph’s son?”*

We’ve known Jesus his whole life, since he was a little boy, we didn’t know he could read the Torah, and now he’s claiming to be anointed by God to bring good news to us!

Would you look at that, our little Jesus has grown up and now he’s our town’s pride and joy!

Well, this festive spirit lasts for a whole of a few minutes and then things go south really fast.

Jesus does not revel in their accolades; he doesn’t accept their fanfare.

In fact, he rebukes them because he knows they’re going to abandon him.

He says, *“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.*

But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;

yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ (Luke 4: 33-37)

In just a bit we'll get back to the significance of the people and the circumstances he names.

But Jesus either accurately predicts the future or his prophecy manifests it, because sure enough, he was right.

He said they wouldn't accept him, and immediately after he said these things, "*...all in the synagogue were filled with rage.*"

They 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." (Luke 4: 28-29)

Jesus' followers were mad because what he said did not meet their expectations.

There's a famous saying that goes, 'disappointment is expectations minus reality.'

Well, Jesus' followers had really high expectations, especially after hearing Jesus read in the Temple.

And when the reality of what he said was so vastly different from what they expected, they got mad.

You see, the Galileans, or people who lived in Galilee at the time, they were considered second-class citizens.

Judeans, or people from Judea, would have looked down on those from Galilee as peasants, common, or dirty people.

And the people from Nazareth, Jesus' own people, they were in the larger region of Galilee, so they were part of the group who was treated in this oppressed way.

It's natural for any of us who are oppressed or who have been treated unfairly to want the balance restored.

We want to be vindicated for what's happened to us, we want retributive justice.

Jesus' followers thought, this is great, he's the one we've been waiting for.

Finally, the tide is going to turn, we are going to be on top, and those Judeans are going to know what it's like to suffer.

Well, as per usual with Jesus, he doesn't deliver what the people expect.

They thought he was going to give them preferential treatment because he's one of them.

They thought he was going to look out for them, but boy were they mistaken.

The people in Nazareth were way too self-interested and too worried about their own self-preservation.

Jesus tells them that God's concern isn't only for them but for *all* the oppressed.

It's not about having them on top instead of the Judeans, it's about leveling the playing field so that everybody is equal, because God is the God for everyone.

He illustrates this message through the examples he uses.

He says look at the prophet Elijah and what he did.

There was a famine all over the land, but he wasn't sent to the 'chosen people,' to the Jews or to the Israelites, he went to a pagan widow from Zarephath.

And then there were many lepers in Israel, and did God send the prophet Elisha to heal any of the Israelites?

No. God sent Elisha to heal Naaman, the Syrian leper.

Elijah and Elisha helped the outcasts, the pagan widow and the Syrian.

They cut right through the in-group of Israelites and helped the people on the outside, on the margins.

So, problem number one is that Jesus doesn't immediately align himself as the great defender of the Galileans, which makes his local community angry.

And, he doesn't promise them vindication, which makes them even angrier.

In fact, as I mentioned before, in the scripture immediately preceding this, he quotes the prophet Isaiah but he leaves out a very interesting piece of this prophetic statement.

So, he's going along basically word for word, saying he will *"proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,*

to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour," (Luke 4: 18-19), and that's where the scripture in the Gospel of Luke stops.

Whereas in the book of Isaiah, chapter 61 that he is quoting, the prophet says,

*"The spirit of God is upon me... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, **and the day of vengeance of our God...**"* (Isaiah 61: 1-2).

Jesus leaves out that whole day of vengeance bit.

It's like he was reading the Torah scroll in the Temple, got to that line, and said, hmmm, nope.

I am not proclaiming the day of vengeance, that's not the relationship I have with God.

The problem is that this is what his followers and his hometown people were expecting, but he didn't deliver.

So, upon hearing that they won't be vindicated, and that he won't favor them, just as Elijah and Elisha didn't favor the local people, they get mad and they try to hurl him off a cliff, but the text says *"he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."* (Luke 4: 30).

The writer of the Gospel of Luke doesn't explain exactly what he means by Jesus passing through the people and avoiding being thrown off the cliff, so we are left to interpret that as we choose.

Sometimes Jesus gets this reputation for being spineless.

People will mockingly quote his mandate to turn the other cheek, indicating that he's weak.

But I think this scripture took some incredible courage.

Jesus is so committed to his faith that he knows he doesn't answer to the people he grew up with.

He presumably loves them, but his loyalty to God is much stronger than any allegiance he might have to them.

He would be the worst politician, going to his hometown where he's guaranteed to get the vote, and instead manages to turn everyone against him.

He tells them what he knows to be true, not what they necessarily want to hear, and it caused him to quickly lose his golden boy status.

But you know what, being prophetic isn't popular and it often causes backlash.

Think about every single social movement from the abolition of slavery to the women's right to vote, to the Civil Rights movement, to the gay rights movement.

In every single one of these huge waves of social change, people lost their lives for the cause.

The first people to stick their necks out in favor of it, they were often martyred for the cause.

It's our responsibility not to give into the status quo, but to be brave and faithful enough to name injustice and to do something about it when we see it.

We, too, can be prophets.

Prophets don't foretell the future, as many people think.

They tell the truth about the present, they name it, and then they give hope to God's presence.

I have found, in my life, that I usually don't experience backlash for naming all the problems in the world.

When I talk about war and poverty and how we're slowly making the planet an inhospitable place to live, people usually agree with all that, and they nod with a sense of resigned, defeated acceptance.

But when you get onto part two, to the Good News, that the story isn't finished, that a better world or a better future lies ahead, then people start to look at you like you're irrational.

As a person of faith, I have unwavering commitment to Christianity and the good we can do in the world because of our faith.

And I believe in the inherent goodness and worth of all people and I believe that a peaceful, more prosperous future is possible for all the people in our world if we work together to make it so.

But Even when we are surrounded by darkness and doubters, it is our responsibility to testify to the light,

because, as they say, the darker the night, the brighter the light shines.

And besides, if we don't believe in a better future, then we have given into the fatalist notion and our light goes out and we become part of the darkness.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, *"Whatever you do, you need courage.*

Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong.

There are always difficulties arising that tempt you to believe your critics are right.

To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires some of the same courage that a soldier needs.

Peace has its victories, but it takes brave men and women to win them."

Friends, we are part of the movement to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

As Christians, as Christ-followers, as people who believe in something greater than ourselves, we have a responsibility to do our part in making God's favor a reality.

And it won't be a reality for only our community or only our country or only our religion.

Jesus preached liberation for all people.

All people.

He had the courage to speak out and he was rejected by his own community and eventually lost his life because of his prophetic preaching.

The least we can do is devote our lives to making his prophecy a reality. Amen.

Rev. Angela Wells- UCC Burlington, MA