

The Good News and the Cliff | Luke 4:14-30
The Feast of Luke the Evangelist and Companion of Paul
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Introduction

In our reading today from Luke 4, we are presented with a stark contrast: the Good News and the cliff. The passage begins with Jesus being praised by the Jewish crowds as he taught in their synagogues. Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, a passage that proclaims good news to the poor, liberty to the captive and to the oppressed, recovery of sight to the blind, and the inauguration of the year of the Lord's favor.

The crowd was captivated. Jesus had already developed a reputation across the region for teaching and healing "in the power of the Spirit" (v. 14). You can sense the spiritual gravity in the room, as Jesus spoke the last phrase of the Isaiah prophecy, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,." His voice reverberating across the room, soaking into the Spirit-filled air of anticipation, holding each person in the synagogue in suspense.

In the silence, he rolls up the scroll and sits back down. Scripture tells us that "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." I imagine Jesus, with all the calmness and humility of a cross-bearing carpenter, and yet the innate holy confidence that comes from being the incarnate Son of God, fixes his eyes on the crowd, as if he were looking at each person individually. And says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The response was profoundly positive, as it had been across the region. Jesus the enigmatic, Spirit-filled teacher and healer wins them over, immediately. "Everyone spoke well of him," it says in verse 22, and the whole crowd "marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth."

On the official church calendar, the reading ends here. It leaves us hanging on the hopeful words of Jesus. Our hearts filled with wonder, awe, and anticipation. With our eyes fixed on him, and the sense that he stands with

wounded hands open and extended offering to lift us up, to heal us, to set us free—to save us. This is the Gospel. This is Good News.

And yet, by end of the passage, we go from the Good News proclaimed in Galilee to the cliff's edge, with an angry mob seeking to throw Jesus off the side. In fact, if we followed the church's lectionary, we would not get to the rest of this passage (verses 23-30) until **January 30, 2028**. The good news and the cliff would be separated by a full 1 year, 3 months, and 13 days.

As I was studying this passage this week, I kept wondering 'how come I never associated this passage with a crowd that starts by praising Jesus and ends up wanting to throw him off a cliff?'

Did you see that earlier? After Jesus gives a second prophecy?

²⁸ And everyone was filled with wrath in the synagogue when they heard these things. ²⁹ And rising up, they drove him out from the city and led him to the edge of the cliff upon which their city had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff (JFV)

In past readings of this verse, I had focused on Jesus fulfilling the prophecy to "bring good news." Or Jesus saying, "no prophet is acceptable in his hometown." But never, "and they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff!"

The good news and the cliff. What happened? What turned this enthusiastic crowd into an angry murderous mob?

We'll look at this passage in two parts. First, a prophecy that proclaims the good news of God's salvation to the Jews, leading to rejoicing and adulation (vv. 16-22). Second, a prophecy that extends that salvation through Israel to all nations, leading to outrage and violence (vv. 23-30). Praise and rage, the good news and the cliff.

I. The Good News (vv. 16-22)

As we begin by examining the Good News, it is crucial to recognize the Jewish context of this episode. In verse 16, we read that Jesus “came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.” Nazareth was a small village, in the region of Galilee which was in the northern part of Israel.

We then hear that, “he went to the **synagogue** on the **Sabbath day**, and he stood up to read.”

Nazareth of Galilee. Synagogue. Sabbath. The reading of Holy Scripture. All of these things indicate and emphasize the **Jewish** setting to this passage. Jesus was not delivering a TED talk in an ancient a multi-cultural melting pot like Arlington—he was speaking to *his people*, the Jews, in *his place*, Galilee, from *his holy book*, the Hebrew Bible.

And in that holy book, look at verse 17. It says the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Jesus [and] “he unrolled the scroll and **found the place where it was written.**”

Isaiah 61 was not the ‘passage of the day,’ so to speak. It wasn’t pre-written on the front of their bulletin, the Weekly Nazarene. No, Jesus intentionally selects this passage for his own prophetic purposes. But why this passage? Was it just his favorite or something? What does the passage say and what does it mean? Hear it again (verses 18-19),

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me [the word there is ἐχρίσέν; the word from which get “christened” or “Christ”]
to proclaim **good news** [that’s the word, εὐαγγελίζω; which means “gospel”] to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The list Jesus recites here in verses 18-19 was well-known to every Jew who knew their Scriptures. It was from a section of Isaiah that spanned from chapter 40 to chapter 66. To the Jews of the time, the realities that Jesus read about from the prophet Isaiah signaled the long-awaited arrival of the kingdom of God. It meant the prophecies forecast long ago were finally being fulfilled by Israel's Messiah.

When Jesus read this list, everyone in that synagogue knew—the time had come. The Lord was about to make all things new. God was about to return to Zion to dwell with his people. Israel would soon worship freely in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit rather than under the thumb of Rome with all her restrictions and reigning puppet kings.

The “year of the Lord's favor” referred to the Old Testament concept of the Jubilee year. In Leviticus 25, the Jubilee was given as a time when all debts would be forgiven, all lands restored, and every wrong made right in the land of Israel. At the time of Jesus, the Jubilee was largely associated with the coming of the kingdom of God. For the Jews, the end-time was like an eternal Jubilee for the Jewish people, an endless victory that resulted in the permanent presence of God with his people in an unending age of peaceful shalom.

Every Jew knew that *these* signs accompanied *that* age. And when Jesus said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” his hearers could sense that the Old Covenant signs had found their fulfillment in the New Covenant the savior.

But what was the response of the people? Look at verse 22,

“all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.”

Now, if we read Luke's account in comparison with Mark and Matthew's renderings, we discover that the villager's impressions were a bit more mixed than Luke's rendering reveals. They seemed to have been impressed and surprised, but also somewhat skeptical.

- “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” they say in the Matthean version, and
- “[the crowd] **took offense at him,**” and
- “[Jesus] did not do many mighty works there, **because of their unbelief.**”

The crowd’s mixed response to the messianic message did not hinder the overall sense of hope and wonder they felt. They fixed their eyes on Jesus and marveled, the passage says.

What would we think, if Jesus came to Falls Church, Virginia and signaled to us, “the kingdom of God is finally arriving.” How would we take this message if he gave it to us, as 21st century Christians?

For many, it would be code for “the promise of everlasting life in heaven.” If you thought along those lines, you’d certainly be correct, but only partially correct. As N.T. Wright says, “heaven is great, but it’s not the end of the world.” Heaven is a central and glorious part of the gospel, but the Jews who Jesus addressed were not hearing merely hearing him say ‘the world is going to end, and I’m going to take you to heaven.’ The Jews were hearing Jesus say: now is the time that heaven comes to renew the face of the earth. Now is the time when God will set all things right—Jubilee. Now is the time when God will come to dwell with his people restored—forgiven, freed, and flourishing in the shalom of the New Jerusalem.

One way to understand the Jewish mindset here is the word “liberty” in verses 18-19. The word translated,

- **liberty** for the captives and oppressed”
- **forgiveness** of sins in Luke 1:77, and
- **forgiveness** of debts in Luke 11:4

The word refers to both:

- “forgiveness” and “freedom,”
- “**acquittal** in God’s courtroom” and “**liberation** from every earthly and spiritual oppression”

In other words, salvation has both **eternal heavenly significance** and **immediate earthly impact**. Christians sometimes live as though earthly life is a form of present-day purgatory. An unfortunate waiting period before the truly good stuff happens later, elsewhere, in heaven.

But Jesus teaches us to pray that his will would be done and that his kingdom would come **on earth** as it is in heaven.

- St. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5 that in Christ we are made to be “new creations.” Not sometime in the future; somewhere else. Here and now.
- He calls us to be “ambassadors for Christ” and “ministers of reconciliation” in this world, to point people toward the glory of God in salvation and the furthering of his kingdom purposes in society.

As Christians the proclamation of good news to the poor, the liberation of the captives and the oppressed, the healing of the broken-hearted and the afflicted, the protection of the life, dignity, freedom, and equity of every human being made in the image of Almighty God, from the moment of conception to moment of natural death, is **not** incidental to the gospel, is **not** ancillary to the gospel, is **not** optional to the gospel; it is **integral** to the gospel.

It is for *these very things* that Jesus was anointed. The **kingdom reality** of eternal life must therefore always be accompanied by the **kingdom acts** of liberation, healing, Jubilee, and justice. If we focus only on how to get to heaven; we forget that Jesus means to bring heaven to earth to see the whole creation redeemed. Present earthly action is the sign and seal of the forthcoming fullness of the kingdom of God—on earth as it is in heaven. Good news to the poor. Liberation for the captive and oppressed. Healing and the Lord’s Jubilee of equity for all peoples. These are KPIs (key performance indicators) of the kingdom of God.

But why would this be a problem? I began by saying that this was the story of the Good News and the cliff. Why did the crowd turn on Jesus and drive him to the cliff’s edge?

II. The Cliff

Look at verses 25-27.

- In verse 25 there were **many widows “in Israel in the days of Elijah.”**
- In verse 27 there were **many lepers “in Israel during the time of Elisha.”**

Despite this great affliction in Israel, only two people receive the attentions of Israel’s prophets and neither of them are Israelites.

- Elijah is sent to the widow Zerephath of Sidon (v. 26) and,
- Elisha heals Naaman the Syrian (v. 28).

The **Elijah story** is from **1 Kings 17:8-24**, and the woman he heals is from a Philistine city. The **Elisha story** comes from **2 Kings 5**, and Naaman was a general in the army of Aram which was one of Israel’s major enemies. In both examples, a Gentile is ministered to rather than an Israelite, despite significant distress, disease, and famine persisting amongst the people of God.

How do the people respond? With rage.

Look at verses 28-39.

²⁸ And **everyone was filled with wrath in the synagogue** when they heard these things. ²⁹ And rising up, **they drove him out from the city and led him to the edge of the cliff** upon which their city had been built **so that they could throw him off the cliff.**

Here we begin to see the real issue that led from the Good News to the cliff:

- **The Jews had turned the promises of salvation inward rather than outward.**

- They began to exist for their own prosperity and blessing rather than the people through whom God would bless all the families of the world.

One commentator noted that,

“[Israel was enraged to hear that salvation] would be **for all** and **not just for them** . . . and . . . that God’s . . . salvation [was intended for] the poor and oppressed of all nations and not just for Jews . . . [this] aroused . . . [their] wrath, impelling them to fulfill Jesus’ statement; **he is not acceptable in his own country because his mission extends beyond his own country**” (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 82).

Conclusion

Religious people find comfort in telling stories that build inner solidarity.

This is not a bad thing. Every group needs to define itself, to cohere, and to have a mission that drives it forward. When institutions lack these things, they wander aimlessly.

But with Israel, this bounded view of their own self-importance over against the world caused them to forget their entire reason-for-being—**to bring salvation to all nations**. To participate in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise in Genesis that through Abraham’s offspring **all the families of the world** would be blessed.

In forgetting its mission by focusing inwardly, Israel began to see itself as existing in isolation as the people of God instead of the nations. And Christians, when we hear the Good News and weaponize it against the world, we too can forget that our call is to bring them into the blessing of gospel grace.

- Jesus didn’t come to war against the culture; he came to win the culture.

- Jesus didn't come instead of the world; he came for the sake of the world.
- Jesus didn't die to destroy the nations; he died to destroy death so that he could save the nations.

That was the whole point of Israel's election. And that is our vocation too. Our heritage, our gospel mandate, our Great Commission. As the Simeon puts it in Luke 2 when he holds the baby Jesus in his arms in the temple,

³⁰ my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

The Jews knew this; so why did they force Jesus out to the cliff? We know it too. Deep down, we know it. So why do we, today, so often find ourselves at the cliff when we hear the call of Christ to live radical lives for Jesus in a dark and broken world?

Sometimes when faced with a big call, it's easier to shrink back into something smaller, something more familiar, something more manageable. Something that asks less of us; but gives less to us. We're willing to throw gospel ambition off the cliff, because it threatens our comfort, or because it challenges our preferences, or reveals our prejudices. Because it disrupts our sense of coherence and peace. Sometimes progress induces anxiety because it inevitably calls for comprehensive change in our lives, in society, in the church, in our calling. And so, we find ourselves at the cliff.

Maybe we don't want to toss Jesus off the side, but we want to toss his calling on our lives over the side. Retire from lives of active discipleship. Maybe it's not our calling, but our hunger for holiness. It's too compromised, I'm too impure, it's a lost cause. Throw it over the side. He asks too much of me. But maybe there's another way. Jesus didn't escape the cliff by going over it, but by walking directly through their midst. Maybe that's the perfect image for what we can do, when we like the crowd in Galilee become incensed at the confusing call of Christ, overwhelmed by the depths of our sin and the

slowness of sanctification, angry with the healing of Naaman the enemy while our own bodily afflictions persist and worsen. When we feel betrayed, hurt, abandoned, alone, and faith is not delivering the answers we feel we need, or expect, or deserve. When we find ourselves at the cliff with the crowd, ready to just toss this whole Jesus thing over the side and take up some new hobby to distract ourselves from the pain and confusion of life.

The good news calls us to be the light of Christ in a very broken world, as very broken people, who sometimes feel we cannot be fixed. My prayer for each one who finds ourselves at times at the cliff's edge of faith, ready to toss Jesus off the side, is that we would instead follow Jesus through the midst of the crowd, on to the next adventure.

Discussion Questions

- (1) How does the fact that the gospel is “good news to the poor, to the oppressed, to the captive, and to the broken” change the way we live now? How can that functionally play out in the way we live in society and among family, neighbors, and friends?
- (2) The Galilean synagogue attendees found that Jesus’ pronouncement of Isaiah 61 was “good news” but the sharing of salvation with the nations was worthy of killing Jesus. What are some ways that this insular, ‘us-against-them’ view can show up in the modern church?
- (3) When Jesus does not meet our expectations and challenges our comfort, we may be on the verge of throwing faith off the cliff and walking away alone. This is seen in the passage, and it often happens in real life, in deconstructing faith and doubt. How can the idea that there is another path, through the crowd with Jesus rather than throwing faith off the cliff, make us hopeful that we can get through tough seasons by God’s grace and provision.
- (4) How does knowing that Jesus is fulfilling Old Testament prophecy strengthen or solidify the truthfulness of the Bible across the testaments?
- (5) The lectionary leaves out verses 23-30, and so the passage has a mainly positive tone—Good News in Jesus! What is the problem of reading a passage in complete parts? What is missed? How does the full picture provide a more durable account of human faith, doubt, and redemption in Christ?