

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 4:22-30, “Jesus’ Mission Rejection”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/26/2025

It happens a little less frequently than it used to,
but from time to time I still get comments on what a young pastor I am.
But truth be told, I’m 47 now and I’ve been engaged
in theology / ministry full time in various forms since 1997.

So if you think I look young now,
you should have seen me 18 years ago when I first turned up
as the Pastor of Redevelopment
at Aldrich Avenue Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis.
Fresh out of seminary, full of new ideas, presented with a mandate for change,
those poor Minnesotans had to use all the Minnesota nice they had
to keep me afloat.

When I had to share my hopes and dreams with those folks,
inspire them with a vision for what their ministry could become,
prove that I was worth taking a risk on ...
Oh, it was anxiety provoking, you betcha.

I remember a meeting where I had everything laid out
for a new multicultural worship format where we would incorporate
a variety of languages and musical influences for our Sunday services,
with a new worship director who could help us
become a church that represented the incredible diversity
of the surrounding neighborhood.

I shared all the theory and the process and how things would go,
that we’d become a church committed to the ministry of reconciliation
and all the changes that would require.

They listened very attentively, and politely.

After the meeting, someone walked up to me
and shook my hand and simply said,
“Well, that was different.”

As a fresh-faced 29 year old minister (a year younger than Jesus was!)
I thought, “Yeah – it *is* different! And different is good.”

Well, I soon came to learn that in the upper mid-west, “that’s different”
was the death knell for any new idea.

Now maybe you’ve never been a young pastor leading change,
but I’m sure you can relate to putting yourself out there to a group of
friends, family, or coworkers, only to be laughed at,
condescended to, ignored, or doubted.

No matter what vision we have for our life, for our church, for our world,
people don’t always respond as we hope.
Today’s passage reveals that, if nothing else,
we’ve got that in common with Jesus.

Last week we looked at Jesus’ mission proposal
to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth.
His vision came from the prophet Isaiah.

It was simple, practical.
It integrated the spiritual, social, physical aspects of life.
It was Spirit empowered.
It declared the year of the Lord’s favor.

And I suggested that as the Spirit filled body of Christ, the modern day church
is invited to share in Jesus’ mission even today.

After reading the Isaiah prophecy, Jesus, the hometown boy, declared that
Isaiah’s prophetic words were fulfilled in their very presence.
What was their response? They all spoke well of him!

“Oh, isn’t this Joseph’s son? My, he’s all grown up. What a fine young man he is.
Well, we always knew he’d be something special, didn’t we?
And the year of the Lord’s favor? My goodness,
that will certainly be nice for us here in Nazareth, won’t it?

I mean if anyone deserves the Lord's favor from Jesus, it's us, don't you think?

We always encouraged him, didn't we?

Jesus, you'll do right by us, won't you, when you get all this favor from the Lord?"

Isn't this Joseph's son. That's the thing they pointed out first.

Jesus knew at that moment that they had completely rejected his mission proposal.

They did not identify him as anointed by the Spirit of Yahweh,

they saw him as Joseph and Mary's kid.

They wanted nothing to do with proclaiming good news for the poor in general –
they wanted good news for themselves.

We learn these details about the Nazareth synagogue members

through Jesus' rebuke. He says, "Surely you will say to me,

'Physician heal thyself.'"

This is an ancient saying that indicates doing good to one's own self,
or (as in this instance) to one's own people.

"Physician, don't only heal other people – *heal thyself*."

"Jesus, don't give all these good things to other towns and villages,
give an extra portion to your hometown supporters."

But a true prophet doesn't let other people define their mission.

This is why Jesus' says,

"Truly, prophets are not accepted in their home towns."

He then gives examples from history that clarify the nature of his mission:

First, there were many hungry widows in Israel when there was a famine
in the prophet Elija's time, but Elija only brought the miracle of daily
flour and oil to one widow in Zarephath.

Second, there were many with leprosy in the prophet Elisha's time,
but Elisha only healed the leprosy of Naaman, the Syrian.

Jesus is saying that prophets aren't sent by God to solve everyone's problems.

Did you hear that?

Prophets aren't sent by God to solve everyone's problems.

Their job is not to make everything better.

A prophet does miracles to provide a reminder of what's true,

to point to God's purposes in the world,

to wake people up and reorient their minds

so they can understand life from God's perspective.

The OT miracles that Jesus references

and the miracles that Jesus did in his own time

and miracles that have occurred since then

all fit this same framework.

Miracles are rare signs that point people to God's power, truth, and love.

But they don't happen for everyone. And they don't solve all our problems.

And they don't happen more for people who have a special connection
with Jesus.

This is what Jesus told his hometown crowd.

"Well, Jesus ... that's different." Oh yeah, you betcha!

But these people of Nazareth were all out of Minnesota nice.

They didn't like having their self-serving subtext called out,

and they drove Jesus to the edge of a cliff

with the intent of killing him.

This is Jesus' first day on the job. People want to kill him.

You remember what happened on his last day on the job? Same thing.

Jesus would not let anyone derail the focus of his mission,

and this was not received well.

I've been rolling this idea around in my head for the last couple of weeks,
and it's been very helpful in processing my reaction
to our nation's new president.

On one hand, you have people of faith who are thrilled.
We should be supporting this new president as an extension God's will.

On the other hand, you have people of faith who are appalled.
We should be opposing this new president as an abomination.

Both of these responses, it seems to me, are attempts to derail
the followers of Jesus from their connection to the mission of Jesus.

Even in perilous times for a society,
it is not the job of the church to support or oppose politicians.

Keeping up with the news can also derail us from the mission of Jesus.
It's not our job to know everything about everything and have an opinion
on everything that happens in the world. I used to try to do that.
It drove me crazy!

Do you remember what the mission of Jesus is?

- 1) To receive the anointing of God's Spirit. We must maintain spiritual practices that keep us vitally connected to the Spirit because this is how we discern together what direction we should walk in.
- 2) To proclaim good news for the poor, sight for the blind, release from captivity, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of God's *grace*, the free gift of God's love and favor.

In Jesus' presence, these things become reality.

In Jesus' presence, our fate in life is reversed.

As the church embodies the life of Jesus in the world,
God brings about these miraculous reversals *as a sign*
of God's power, truth, and love.

When our neighbors are oppressed, fearful, and vulnerable,
the church is called to stand together with them, listen to them,
help them in practical ways, give voice to their concerns,
and invite Jesus to abide among us as a community.

But just as with the miracles of the Bible,
God does not fix all the world's problems through the church.
And the church is derailed from its mission when we think,
"We could wield power better than this politician with his worldly vision.
Let's become a political movement ourselves
and then we can make the world the way Jesus would want it."

No. No! That is simply allowing other people to change our job description.
God's ways are not the same as humanity's ways.

Our job as the church is to be present with people who are oppressed,
like Jesus was.
Our job is to love our neighbors – and to enter into community with them,
like Jesus did.

Our job is to slow down, make space for the Spirit of God,
and pay attention to discern where the Spirit leads.

If we stick with our job, we will cross paths with the powers of the world.
It could be our own hometown neighbors who reject our mission.
It could be big national powers who reject our mission.
It could be that by living in this way, we put ourselves in harm's way.
After all, Jesus told his disciples that no servant is above their master,
so those who follow Jesus should expect
the same kind of treatment from the world
that he has received.

But there is nothing to fear. We need not be afraid.
For we worship the one who has overcome the world.