

SERMON NOTES

Sunday, May 18

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 4:25-30

HE CAME TO HIS OWN, BUT THOSE WHO WERE HIS OWN DID NOT RECEIVE HIM¹

INTRODUCTION

The event that Luke records in our reading today is the final result of a visit that our Lord made to his hometown of Nazareth sometime towards the beginning of His three year ministry. This visit was His first to Nazareth after His baptism. It was no doubt also His last visit there. Our reading today gives us good reason to assume that He never returned to His boyhood home.

Luke's entire account of the visit begins with verse 14 of our chapter. It is the record of the attendance of our Lord in the synagogue of Nazareth on a Sabbath day. There we are given the reading He chose from the prophet Isaiah,² and a summary of His following sermon. We have studied this section of the record previously in the Sermon Notes for October 21 entitled "A Time for Forgiveness and Restoration." For a fuller explanation of the verses preceding our reading please review those sermon notes.

We pick up the account today as Jesus, sensed the unbelief in the audience that the prophecy of the coming of the great King/Messiah/Christ was being, at that very moment, fulfilled in His own Person. Their skepticism demanded a miraculous sign such as they had *heard* He had done elsewhere. Their unbelief was not to be rewarded as Jesus is about to make clear in the reading that follows.

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 4:25-30

"I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

¹ John 1:11

² Isaiah 61:1

And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.”

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.

But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

NOTES

“I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.

Jesus in the verse just preceding this statement has told the audience in the synagogue of Nazareth that “No prophet is accepted in his own country.”³ He has said this in response to His knowledge of what they were thinking in their minds. They were not accepting Him. They were repeating the sins of their forefathers when the prophets of old had been messengers of God. His Holy Spirit had rested on the prophets so that the words that they spoke were God’s own words. However, the people of Israel had not accepted them and had murdered most of them because they did not like the message the prophets gave concerning their sins.⁴

Jesus had just told the people in the congregation that the Holy Spirit had anointed Him—they had a prophet in their midst, and actually One even greater than a prophet.⁵ Jesus knew that they were about to treat Him exactly like their forefathers had treated the other prophets. They did not accept Him and we shall see that after they heard His message they would try to kill Him too.⁶

Jesus reminded them of the history of one of the greatest of the prophets—Elijah. In the days of Elijah, the people were far from God. Their king, Ahab, was the worst in their history at that time.⁷ He married a pagan princess, Jezebel, from the land of Sidon, and at her instigation Ahab had promoted the worship of the false god, Baal, to the people.⁸ Influenced by their king, Ahab, this Baal is what the people of Elijah’s day worshipped instead of the One true God of their ancestors.

To bring the people back to Himself, God had brought a drought upon the land.⁹ There was no rain for three and one half years.¹⁰ This drought showed how useless it was to worship Baal, the so called ‘god of rain’.

³ Luke 4:24

⁴ Matthew 23:29-37.

⁵ Quoting Isaiah 61:1, Jesus told them they were witnessing the fulfillment of the prophecy.

⁶ Luke 4:23-24

⁷ 1 Kings 16:29-33

⁸ Ibid. cf. 1 Kings 18:21.

⁹ 1 Kings 17:1

¹⁰ Our Lord is more specific as to the length of the drought than the 1 Kings 17 passage.

Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath¹¹ in the region of Sidon.

During this time, God sent Elijah out of the land to, of all places, Sidon,¹² the native land of Jezebel. The prophet, bearing the Holy Spirit of God, left those unbelievers in Israel. In Sidon, the land of the pagans, God had prepared a poor widow woman to receive Elijah. During his stay with her, she never lacked for flour or oil with which to bake the bread she and her son and Elijah lived on.¹³

The people of Nazareth, like the Jews of their nation, were proud of the fact that they were ‘the Chosen People.’ It was upsetting to them to be reminded of those days of apostasy and idol worship. Even worse, it made them angry to think that God would turn from favoring *them*, to favor a non-Jew. Instead of one of their own widows, God had favored a widow from another people—an *odiar*!

And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

During the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, Sidon had been an ally. After all, Jezebel was the king of Sidon’s own daughter.¹⁴ So, possibly, in case any of His hearers may have rationalized that the favor of God had been granted to the widow because of her country’s alliance with ‘the Chosen People,’ Jesus brought another example, the case of the prophet Elisha and Naaman the Syrian.

Elisha had been Elijah’s apprentice and was Elijah’s successor.¹⁵ The Spirit of God rested powerfully on Elisha after God had taken Elijah to heaven in a chariot of fire.¹⁶ During this time the son of the evil pair, Ahab and Jezebel, reigned in Israel.¹⁷ Though Ahab was dead, Jezebel remained as the Queen mother and continued the promotion of Baal.¹⁸ The LORD was recognized but the people for the most part were still steeped in their unbelief and idolatry and therefore were under the discipline of God.

The Syrians, or the Arameans, as they are referred to in the Old Testament, were enemies of Israel and often came against them in war and terrible sieges.¹⁹ A little Israelite girl had been taken during one of the attacks and became the slave of Naaman, one of the great captains of the army of the king of Syria. Naaman was a leper and the little girl told her mistress about the great prophet, Elisha, and that she was sure Elisha could heal her master. When Naaman went to Elisha’s house, the prophet told him to dip seven times in the River Jordan and he would be healed. This was not what Naaman had expected but his advisors urged him to obey the prophet. When he did, Naaman was cured and became a devout believer in the One God of Israel.²⁰

Thus, God favored foreigners who were willing to believe in Him over the ‘Chosen People’ who were disloyal to Him. This truth from the past was hated by the congregation of Nazareth. They wanted to believe that only the Israelites could be blessed by their God.

¹¹ This ancient city lay between Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast.

¹² Sidon was a major city kingdom in the region of today’s Lebanon.

¹³ 1 Kings 17:9-16

¹⁴ 1 Kings 16:31

¹⁵ 1 Kings 19:15-17

¹⁶ 2 Kings 2:1-15

¹⁷ 2 Kings 3:1

¹⁸ 2 Kings 9:22

¹⁹ 1 Kings 20

²⁰ This account is found in 2 Kings 5:1-27

What was Jesus' point? Just as Israel was the native soil of Elijah and Elisha, Nazareth was the hometown of Jesus. When the prophets upon whom the Holy Spirit rested were not accepted, God used the prophets to bless outsiders. If our Lord in Whom the Holy Spirit dwelt was not accepted for who He is in His hometown, He would not stay to bless them with miracles but would go away from Nazareth and bless others.

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

The people in the synagogue were furious because Jesus had insinuated that they were the same as the wicked generation of their forefathers. They were furious because Jesus had pointed out that God's love is not bound to their nation only; but He is open to all those open to Him. They were furious that this man they had known all His life had dared say such things to them. They could not contain their hatred and their murderous fury. Thus, they turned upon the One Who was God in their midst, choosing to defend their wounded pride over acceptance of the truth.

They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.

Their actions more than proved that Jesus spoke the truth. They were no better than their forefathers who murdered the prophets sent to them with the message of God. Moreover, in rejecting Jesus, they rejected the Savior God had so graciously sent to them. His Presence had lived among the people of Nazareth longer than in any other town of their nation. Imagine! He had grown up there from boyhood. Yet, they were so far from God in their hearts that they had sensed nothing and even when He told them plainly Who He is²¹ they refused to believe.

But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

It was not the 'hour' for His death and it was not the place. After a few years of ministry, the 'hour' would come and His way would lead to the Cross on the brow of a hill called Golgotha outside²² the walls of Jerusalem. For now, He left those who would not accept Him and the forgiveness and restoration He offered. It was their choice to remain in their blindness and sin.

APPLICATION

Elijah, who the Armenian Church especially remembers today, was a powerful prophet sent by God to open the spiritually blind eyes of God's ancient people, now known as the Jews. The climax of Elijah's ministry came when he single-handedly faced hundreds of pagan priests who had corrupted God's people and who had led them into idol worship. The show down happened high on a hill-top, Mt. Carmel, and God demonstrated there that He alone is God. The forces of evil were soundly defeated and exposed as the blind leaders of the blind. The event opened the eyes of God's people that day, but most in Israel fell back into the sin of unbelief that eventually led to their descendants being carried away as slaves into Assyria.²³

In our reading for today, we heard that the people of Jesus' home town were so furious with statements He made about their history that they wanted to kill Him. This was the end of the story of a visit by Jesus to Nazareth soon after the beginning of His three

²¹ See the earlier part of this account when Jesus applied Isaiah's prophecy to Himself.

²² John 19:20

²³ 2 Kings 17:23. The state of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Later her sister state, Judah, was defeated by the Babylonians in 586 BC and her people carried away as slaves.

year ministry. Earlier verses record that Jesus had read a passage of Scripture from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue that day. Following the reading, Jesus had given the sermon in which He explained the prophecy. It had foretold a glorious day when God would open the spiritually blind eyes of the people so that they would understand the truth and be forgiven of their sins and restored to Him. Jesus announced that the great day had arrived and that He was the One of Whom Isaiah had written.

However, when Jesus sensed that the congregation did not believe Him, He began to warn them of the danger of their unbelief from examples of their own history. Two of their most famous prophets had blessed outsiders instead of citizens of Israel. In the case of Elijah, God had sent the prophet to miraculously provide food for a poor widow and her son in a time of severe famine in that part of the world. The Gentile woman living in a pagan land truly trusted God at a time when Israel did not.

In the case of Elijah's successor, Elisha, God had helped a man who assisted Israel's despised enemy, the king of Syria. The man, Naaman, came in belief to the prophet and was cured of his leprosy. Jesus' point was that the unbelievers in Israel had been denied the blessings extended to foreigners. These two foreigners represented the complete social spectrum, the politically powerful Naaman and the poor and helpless but believing widow—people drawn from both Israel's political ally and from Israel's deadly enemy.

These examples Jesus brought as warnings that God does not bless unbelievers even though they are privileged to be the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead God provides for believers in Himself, no matter what social station or nation they may represent.

These warnings did not bring the Jews of Nazareth to their senses. However, their sense of entitlement to God's favor and their ethnic pride was stung. They were furious. In their murderous fury they attempted to kill Jesus by flinging Him over a cliff. But Jesus, ever in control, simply walked away, never to return to the town that had been privileged to see Him grow up. Their unbelief cost them the blessings of forgiveness and restoration to God that He had so graciously come to offer them. Sadly, as Luke shows in His Gospel, the pattern of unbelief demonstrated in Nazareth, was followed by most of the Jews of Jesus day. In the end, following their religious leaders, they cried out for His crucifixion.

Though most of the Jews did not believe, God blessed those of other nations who did. The Church, over the millennia, has by and large been composed of Gentiles. The Armenian people have historically been counted among those who trust that Jesus is the Incarnate God, Who died in their place on the Cross to take away their sins and restore them to God. For seventeen hundred years our Church has stood as a witness to this truth.

But this reading from the Gospel of Luke should cause us to examine our hearts. Do we have a sense of entitlement because we are descendants of great believers? Would our

ethnic pride be stung if the Holy Spirit pointed out instances in our history of the failure of the majority of our people to truly trust God? What if God points to a deficiency of faith in our own heart? Will we be furious? Or will we be thankful of the warning and fall on our knees in repentance?

The people of Nazareth turned away from the Good News of Christ and wanted to kill Him. The writer of the book of Hebrews tell us the frightening fact that those, today, who have understood but turn away from the Light of the Gospel of Christ, crucify to themselves the Son of God again and put Him to open shame.²⁴ May this never be true of any of us! May we, instead, gratefully embrace that Light Who is our Christ and let Him be the great illumination of our people that, as the children of God, we might carry His Good News to the ends of the earth.

“He came to His own, but those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become children of God, even to those who believe in His Name.”-John 1:11-12

²⁴ Hebrews 6:4-6