

Jesus Chooses a Major  
Luke 4:14-30  
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I've preached a lot of sermons. This is number 734, to be exact. Not all of them have been here at Crestwood, although it may feel that way to you. Now, in those previous 733 sermons, there were a lot of bad ones, I mean real clunkers. I had a former preacher say to me yesterday, "If someone falls asleep during a sermon, you need to wake up the preacher." I've definitely fallen asleep during a few of my own sermons. I'm sure a lot of grocery lists have been created while I've been in the pulpit. But I've never had anyone try to throw me off a cliff. Yet. There's a reason I didn't take a church in Colorado.

That sounds preposterous, right? To want to throw someone off a cliff for what they said? Yet that's exactly what happens to Jesus in this story, and the perpetrators are the people he grew up with. Jesus really knows how to make enemies fast! Wasn't he just the cute little baby making cooing sounds in the manger? How did we go from, "Goochy goochy goo" to "Get him!"? What could he have said that was so controversial?

In this sermon series, we're taking a look at the human side of Jesus. If he was fully human like us, then he experienced all the ups and downs we do. Like us, he had good days and bad days, days when people wanted to celebrate him and days when they wanted to throw him off a cliff. What can we learn from Jesus as we watch him go through his life as a human?

This story we have today is the first event in Jesus' public ministry. Right before this passage, Jesus is baptized and then goes out into the wilderness for 40 days, where he is tempted by Satan. Now he has returned to start his work, and Luke tells us he's beginning to get a reputation. As he taught and healed in places like Capernaum, "a report about him spread through all the surrounding country." Social media was really starting to buzz. Hashtag: Messiah?

Now, it's time for him to go to Nazareth and preach his first sermon in his home synagogue. I remember the very first sermon I ever preached, which I'm 117% sure was one of those clunkers I mentioned. It was in my home church in Jeffersonville. The sermon was on the prophet Jonah, but other than that I don't remember a thing about it. I was so nervous, preaching in front of my church family, that I would have gladly thrown myself off a cliff rather than step into the pulpit.

But Jesus had no reason to be nervous, because he was coming into town as a minor celebrity. The local paper proclaimed, "Hometown Hero Returns: Jesus, Son of Joseph, to Appear in Synagogue." The locals want to see for themselves what this little whippersnapper had been up to, maybe tweak his cheek and ruffle his hair. Out in the world he may be a big-time rabbi, but back home in Nazareth, Jesus is still Joseph's boy. In the people's minds, Jesus was still who they thought he used to be, not who he was becoming.

Being an observant Jew, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath to worship. As far as we know, worship services back then were simple. You opened by offering prayer, then read scripture, then had a sermon. These duties could be performed by anyone present, so it's not unusual that Jesus was the one who read the passage for the day.

The passage itself wasn't out of the ordinary – a selection from the prophet Isaiah – but what Jesus said afterward is worth noting. Luke tells us that after Jesus read the passage, the people leaned forward in their chairs to see what he had to say. This is it, his first sermon in his

hometown! And here's what he says: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That's it? And Luke says the people were amazed, probably because never in their wildest dreams did they think a preacher could give such a short sermon.

OK, that's probably not what amazed them. What amazed them was that Jesus was taking the words from prophet Isaiah and applying them to himself. The passage he chooses is from a section of Isaiah that promised deliverance for the Israelites: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." Right away Jesus is making a statement about who he is. The word "Messiah" means "anointed one," so Jesus is basically saying he is the One who has been anointed to do these things: to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the year of Jubilee, when all debts would be forgiven. That's quite a mission statement, and Jesus is claiming, right there in front of his former Sunday School teachers and nursery attendants, that his presence means this prophecy has been fulfilled. Jesus is choosing his life's major.

Do you remember your first major in college? I say first because most people change majors about a dozen times. I entered college as a pre-med major, eager to learn how to use a stethoscope and take a blood pressure and help heal people. And then, in my third semester, I took Chemistry. And that's when I became a Communications major. At that stage in my life, I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just knew I didn't want to do any more chemistry.

Jesus has no problems with knowing who he is and what God has called him to do, and he's not afraid to proclaim that as his major, even if it upsets his friends and family. And, obviously, it does! Luke tells us the audience was amazed at Jesus' gracious words and wondered, "Is this not Joseph's son?" In other words, "Really?" The little guy who used to crawl under the pews and sing in the children's choir? Is he saying that he's the fulfillment of this scripture? He's the son of Joseph, not the son of God! In the people's minds, Jesus was still who they thought he used to be, not who he was becoming.

Jesus knows the people want proof that he is the Messiah, but he doesn't give into the expectations of others. Instead of giving them proof, he gives them a tongue-lashing. He compares his audience to the Israelites who lived during the nation's least religious period, during the time of Elijah and Elisha. He points out to them that during that time, God didn't go to the Israelites to provide healing and comfort. He went to a Gentile widow in Sidon and a foreign army general in Syria.

The implication is clear. You remember all those promises in the passage from Isaiah? Freedom, release, good news? Jesus is saying, "Those aren't for you. They are for someone else, someone outside of the fold, someone you probably don't even like." Why? Because the people refuse to see Jesus for who he has become. Many of us are in the same boat. We could sail around the world, cure cancer, and win an Oscar, but back home we're still little Tommy or little Susie. As my mother used to tell me, "You'll never be too big to spank!" Jesus will always be Joseph's son to them. They don't give their understanding of him any room to grow. In the people's minds, Jesus was still who they wanted him to be.

Guilty. I've done that. I've encased Jesus in a certain persona, pigeonholing him as my personal savior and forgetting he's other people's savior, too, even for people who I don't believe deserve a savior. I've tried to hold onto him in a white-knuckled grip, refusing to let my perception of him move beyond my own carefully defined theology. I want Jesus to be my spiritual ATM, doling out grace and forgiveness whenever I ask for it. But I sure don't want him doing the same for other people who aren't nearly as worthy of it as me! It sounds pious to say

we believe in grace for everyone, but in reality a lot of us probably believe in grace for “us” and judgment for “them.” And when Jesus tells his hometown people that God is going to use him to rescue the wrong people, they’d rather kill him than let him go through with it. But go through he does, passing through the midst of them and going on his way to continue his ministry.

This event, right at the beginning of Luke, is a microcosm of the whole gospel: it tells us who Jesus is, what his major is, and how people will react to him. Wanting Jesus dead will be a recurring theme among his opponents, and they’ll finally get their way on Golgotha, as Jesus hangs from the cross. But we know that the Jesus who passes through the midst of crowds also rolls away stones. No matter how much we want to keep him for ourselves, this guy is just impossible to pin down.

I wonder what would happen if we released him? After all, that’s what Jesus was preaching. I think of police dogs who are trained to latch onto a criminal with their jaws until they hear the command to “release!” That’s what Jesus is saying in this passage: “Release!” It may initially sound like those needing release are the destitute among us: the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed. And that’s true. But the only way they can be released is if the Christ-followers in this world work to make it happen. And to do that, we may need to be released ourselves so that we can more freely pursue who we are becoming.

What might we need to be released from? What holds us back from fulfilling this mission Jesus has given us? We might need to be released from the fear that God has called us to work on behalf of those so unlike us. We might need to be released from our faulty belief that the problems of the world are someone else’s responsibility. We might need to be released from the “us vs. them” mentality which seems to dominate so much of our discourse. There is a lot wrong with this world and following Jesus’ lead would help us make a difference in changing things. But the way to start fixing what is wrong with our world is to start fixing ourselves. What might we need to be released from in order to help others – the imprisoned, the poor, the oppressed – experience the Lord’s favor?

Jesus moves on from Nazareth to begin fulfilling this mission, a mission that will ultimately lead him to the cross. It probably would have been safer just to stay where he was, not make any noise, live with his head down and let God sort it out. It would have been easier to stay the person that people thought he was, rather than become the person God created him to be. God has created each of us that way, with the potential to become so much more than we are. And the beautiful thing about being followers of God is that as we help release others – the poor, the imprisoned, the oppressed – we ourselves grow beyond who we are, becoming the people God intends us to be. May that singular commitment to be more like Jesus today than we were yesterday be our major in life. Release!