

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 8, 2023)

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Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** The Stunning Priorities of Jesus' Kingdom

*(Studies in the Gospel of Luke)*

### **The Unwelcomed Liberator**

(Luke 4:14-30)

Study #2

#### **Introduction: About Jesus...**

I propose that we spend the first few months of 2023 here at Northwest considering Jesus. (Good. No "no" votes.)

I'll grant that this doesn't sound all that revolutionary. After all, we are a church and churches are supposed to consider Jesus.

But this year, from now through Easter, our particular, congregational, centering study will be of Jesus' life and ministry. And the lens through which we're going to be viewing Jesus is the one provided us by Luke in His Gospel.

Over the last several weeks, I've spent a good bit of time looking through Luke to prepare for this series of studies.

As I've done so I have become more and more struck by the unique emphasis Luke gives to certain themes as He walks us through the three years of Jesus' ministry.

It is these themes, it is Luke's identification of the stunning priorities of Jesus' mission and kingdom that I want to highlight. And we'll see those stunning priorities this morning.

Today and over the weeks of our study, get ready to be surprised, inspired, and moved to change by Jesus' countercultural values and His expansive love.

*Leading up to clarity of mission... (Luke 1:1--4:29)*

Having just passed through the Christmas season, we have seen Jesus' birth. (Luke 2:1-20) The last scene we'll see before we get to today's main passage is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

I think it would be accurate to describe everything Luke includes from birth to temptation as uplifting, positive, and successful.

When Joseph and Mary presented Jesus for dedication at the temple at day eight of His life, He was praised by the elderly Simeon and then by the elderly widow, Ana. (Luke 2:32, 38)

When Joseph and Mary inadvertently left Jesus in Jerusalem for a few days when He was around the age of twelve, He blew away all the learned rabbis in the temple by His wisdom and by His grasp of Scripture. (Luke 2:41-51)

Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River involved the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Him and a moment of supreme affirmation by His heavenly Father, **"You are My beloved Son, in You I am well pleased."** (Luke 3:1-22)

The genealogy Luke gives us travels a different route through Jesus' ancestors than Matthew gave us and highlights Jesus' universal importance to all people everywhere.<sup>1</sup> (Luke 3:23-38)

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<sup>1</sup> For very good reasons, from David to Jesus, Matthew's and Luke's lists are in almost total disagreement. These differences are well accounted for by very good scholars. It is certainly possible to harmonize the two genealogies.

And even though His time in the wilderness involved temptations to sin after forty days of fasting, Jesus resisted all three temptations, and left the wilderness with a great victory, up 3-0 over the devil.<sup>2</sup>

Truly, to this point, everything is coming up roses for Jesus.

Today, we'll see something different, something dark. But, at least at first, Jesus continues His winning streak as He returned to familiar stomping grounds in the region of Galilee.

### **Jesus' Homecoming (Luke 4:14-15)**

#### **Time Frame**

If we only had Luke's Gospel, we would think that Jesus went directly from the temptation straight to Galilee.

However, since we also have three other accounts of His life, we know that by the time we come to Luke 4, Jesus has already been active for some time.

He has chosen His first disciples, turned water into wine, cleansed the temple in Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> interviewed Nicodemus, and evangelized the Samaritan woman at the well.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Jesus' Ministry (vv. 14-15)**

*Beautiful, refreshing Galilee*

Having been elsewhere, He then entered Galilee. And, from what I read, Galilee is the most beautiful region of the Holy Land.

The terrain around Jerusalem has been compared to some of the drier parts of the Texas Hill Country. Galilee has been compared to the beautiful forested hills of Virginia. (If any of you here today have been to Galilee and can affirm or contradict this, please feel free.)

So, Galilee would have been physically beautiful. But it would also have been spiritually refreshing. It was far away from the institutional hypocrisy of Jerusalem's Sanhedrin and temple life.

*Jesus' Galilean ministry acclaimed by all (vv. 14-15)*

***[14] And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; and news about Him spread through all the surrounding region.***

Jesus was about thirty years old at this point. ***[15] And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all.***

He was the wonder Teacher of the day. He was becoming famous. Success and popularity followed Him wherever He went.

(Spoiler alert) What we are about to read marks a transition to trouble. Trouble arises when He returned to the place where He grew up, the small village of Nazareth.

### **Messianic Ministry Defined (Luke 4:16-21)**<sup>5</sup>

#### **Jesus Seizes an Opportunity (v. 16)**

***[16] And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.***<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Luke says that Jesus was led by the Spirit while in the wilderness; Matthew says he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness Both are true.

<sup>3</sup> He did this at least twice, the other time being in the last week of His life.

<sup>4</sup> He had even ministered in Galilee once before (in the city of Capernaum, at least, as John tells us, 2:12, and as this passage informs us later on).

<sup>5</sup> This is the oldest known account of a synagogue service we have.

<sup>6</sup> Some have wondered if there were synagogues in every Galilean village. No doubt there were not. We have no means of estimating the number of Galilean synagogues. but the fact that such a place as Capernaum had either none, or only a poor one, until a Roman centurion was moved to provide one is some evidence that by no means every village or even every small town possessed one. Significantly, Nazareth did have one.

*A return to the place of His childhood*

There in Nazareth, familiar faces would have greeted Him. He would have seen boyhood friends, His parents' friends, His immediate and extended family.

So, imagine hugs, friendly greetings, and proud smiles for this young man who has been making a name for Himself out in the world for God.

It's a happy, worshipful atmosphere in the synagogue. All are pleased to see Jesus and they are looking forward to hearing Jesus.

*Taking a man's role*

There was an "order of service" in the synagogues of the first century, just as Jewish synagogues and Christian churches today have orders of service.

On a typical Sabbath, as many as seven men would be asked to read short portions of the Law.<sup>7</sup> Then would come a reading from the prophets, which was followed by a short sermon.<sup>8</sup> Interspersed throughout the readings would be congregational singing.

As an honored guest on this day, Jesus was invited to fill the role of the one who would read the passage from the prophets, and to give a message.

The synagogue attendant handed Him Isaiah's scroll. The scheduled reading would be from Isaiah. Listen carefully here.

**Isaiah Unveils the Messiah's Career (vv. 17-19)**

***[17] And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He unrolled the scroll, and found the place where it was written,***

***[18] "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR.***

***HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, [19] "TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."***

It is accepted by most scholars that the passage Jesus read (Isaiah 61) describes the ministry of the Messiah, the One who would bring salvation to Israel. So, the "**ME**" at the beginning of the reading is the Messiah.

The prophet Isaiah who wrote this, lived around 650 BC. He's quoting what the Messiah will say when He arrives on the scene.

At the time of Jesus, there was eager anticipation for the arrival of Messiah. The Jews were looking for the One who would liberate them from Rome's oppression and bring spiritual renewal.

I'm sure the Jews in the synagogue in Nazareth were familiar with what Jesus read and I'm just as sure that they were hanging on every word of this treasured passage.

Again, Isaiah describes the Messiah's ministry. Let's take it one line at a time.

*Messiah, Spirit-energized*

***"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME"***

More than anything else, the Messiah will be the One upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests. The Spirit of God will be the source of strength that will energize the Messiah.

And the Messiah will receive the Spirit for particular purposes, which follow.

*Messiah, a ministry to the poor*

***"BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR"***

<sup>7</sup> This first segment of the service was called the *Parashah*.

<sup>8</sup> Called the *Haphtarah*.

That's powerful. The poor don't usually get good news. The poor are used to getting bad news. Something else has broken; something else has gone wrong. We don't have money for this or that.

In Jesus' day, financial prosperity was seen as a sign of God's blessing. To be poor signaled that God's blessing was being withheld for some reason. The poor were looked down upon.

It isn't all that different in our own day. It's easy to look down on the poor. To lack compassion.

The Messiah will not look down on the poor. Isaiah says that Messiah's ministry will specifically target the poor. The poor are those who are most in need of help, and the Messiah's energies will be directed toward them.

*Messiah, a ministry of liberation*

***"HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO CAPTIVES"***

When Isaiah wrote his prophecy, the Jews were living securely on Jewish land. They were soon to be headed to captivity in Babylon.

So, Isaiah wrote much of the last half of his book to prepare God's people for the time of captivity by giving them hope for a future after the captivity.

When Messiah comes, says Isaiah, He will preside over the release of the captives.<sup>9</sup>

Without question, Jesus' audience in Nazareth would have seen a reference to liberation from their own Roman oppression.

*Messiah, a ministry of restoration and illumination*

***"AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND"<sup>10</sup>***

The Messiah will be a wonder-working agent of God. There will be miracles of healing.

The act of literal, physical healing is definitely in view. But it may be that Isaiah had in mind the spiritual impact made by the Messiah. He will open physical AND spiritual eyes.

*Messiah, a ministry of mending the broken*

***"TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED"***

This is a reference to those who are broken by life. Whether in the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus when Isaiah wrote, the first century in which Jesus lived, or in 2023, people experience broken dreams, lost fortunes, and debilitating disease, and all other kinds of tragedies.

Messiah will have a special place in His heart and a special plan for the oppressed and broken.

Finally, Isaiah says that the Messiah will usher in the time of God's reign and the advent of the Kingdom of God.

*Messiah, proclaiming God's time is NOW!*

***"TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."***

The prophet has painted a beautiful, compelling, enticing picture of the time when Messiah will reign. It is stunning.

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<sup>9</sup> There may be a double reference here to the Jewish Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee was observed every 50 years in Israel. During every Sabbatical year (every seventh year), Palestinian fields were to lay fallow to give the land a rest. In the Year of Jubilee, not only was the land to be given rest, but land that had been sold from a family because of debts or need would revert to the original owners. Plus, a Jewish slave in service to a fellow Jew was to be released and set free. Some, in

looking at the calendar, find evidence that the year of Jesus' entry into public ministry was, in fact, a Year of Jubilee. In fact, it may be that A.D. 26-27 was a Jubilee year, which is certainly close to the beginning of the Lord's ministry. <sup>10</sup> This doesn't tie in well with the year of Jubilee, but it might tie in with an exile reference, as captives in prison might have been blinded by their captors, or through long imprisonment in dark dungeons.

Now, if Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61 had been the prescribed reading for the day, I would expect one response from the people in the synagogue in Nazareth.

They would have been impressed with the beauty of the passage. They would have hungered for the time when these Messianic expectations would be fulfilled.

If, however, this passage was not prescribed for the day, but was particularly chosen by Jesus, I envision puzzled expressions.

Luke told us that Jesus "**found**" (4:17) this text while looking through the Isaiah scroll. He chose the text Himself, which explains the stunned looks on the faces of those present when He finished.

### **Jesus Claims Messiahship (vv. 20-21)**

*A very loud silence (v. 20)*

**[20] And He rolled up the scroll, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down;<sup>11</sup> and the eyes of all the people in the synagogue were intently directed at Him.**

The custom in the synagogue was for the reader to stand while reading, and to then take a seat at the conclusion of the reading.

Seated in a chair near the lectern holding the scroll from which He had read, everyone would have expected Jesus to give a sermon based on the text.

I think Jesus probably gave a message and that here, Luke includes the ending of that short message.<sup>12</sup>

*The birth of Jesus' mission (v. 21)*

**[21]... "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."**

<sup>11</sup> Standing to read was the custom in those days, except (oddly) when reading the book of Esther.

Obviously (at least to us, with the perspective of 2,000 years of history), Jesus meant that He had come to fulfill the mission of the Messiah as Isaiah spelled it out.

That claim invited a response - and the responses were varied.

### **The Response To Jesus' Self-Defined Mission (Luke 4:22-30)**

#### **Initial Response to Jesus' First Sermon (v. 22)**

*Empty-headed praise (v. 22a)*

**[22a] And all the people were speaking well of Him, and admiring the gracious words which were coming from His lips..."**

I picture them nodding their heads, approving what He said.

*"He carries Himself well, don't you think? Nice voice control. Good word choice - short and to the point."*

That would have been their initial response. Approval. This is before much processing has happened. One of my commentators suggested that they gave Him "*empty-headed praise.*"

After a bit more processing, there was a shift in the response from empty-headed praise to confusion.

*Confusion reigns supreme! (v. 22b)*

*"Jesus said what? He claims to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah"* Now we picture head-scratching. Into what category were they to put this outrageous claim?

They were even more bewildered when they remembered Who it was who was speaking.

**[22b]...and yet they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?"**

<sup>12</sup> The way the verse reads leads us to imagine that much more was said, a sermon perhaps given that is not recorded here.

This is, you know, just Jesus. The son of the carpenter.

This tells us that the people of Nazareth had never bought into the fantastic story Mary and Joseph told about the virgin birth.

During His early years, these neighbors hadn't seen anything to suggest that Jesus was anything but a perfectly normal Jewish boy. They sure didn't expect that one day they would hear Him claiming to be the Messiah.

So, they are having a hard time accepting this gracious speech - precisely because of Who gave it.

Jesus sensed the skepticism and addressed it. Frontally.

### **Jesus Confronts the Rejection of His Fellow Nazarenes (vv. 23-27)**

*Jesus anticipates their accusation (v. 23)*

***[23] And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself!'<sup>13</sup> All the miracles that we heard were done in Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well."***

He is anticipating their next comments, "Come on Jesus. We've heard about Your works of power. Show us Your stuff."

Jesus knew perfectly well what they were thinking. So, to the proverb He expected them to use on Him, He adds one directed to them.

*Jesus follows a proverb with a proverb (v. 24)*

***[24] But He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown."***

This proverb and, "Physician, heal thyself" mean essentially the same thing.

They both mean that those who are close to something or someone great often fail to appreciate that greatness. These two proverbs accuse the audience of disrespect.

And now we picture jaws dropping there in the synagogue.

Jesus was speaking to elders in the community who had taught Him scripture, boys - now men - with whom He played and worked, family members with whom He shared a home and a heritage.

They are now thinking, "Who does Jesus think He is, talking to US this way?"

Well, He has actually told them exactly who He is (by quoting Isaiah). He now calls them to accept it by telling two stories from the Old Testament that throw the whole crowd for a loop.

His first story comes from the life of one of the great, miracle-working prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah. (1 Kings 17:8-24)

*Jesus provides two illustrations of His proverb (vv. 25-27)*

#### Elijah and the heathen widow (vv. 25-26)

During a terrible famine, God told Elijah to go to the city of Zarephath, north of Israel in the country of Sidon. God told the prophet that a widow in that city would take care of him during this famine.

Elijah found this widow, who was, herself, on the brink of starvation.

He told her to make him a bread cake out of the last bit of flour she had, which she did. And from that day forward, God miraculously supplied her with flour and oil for as long as Elijah stayed with her.

At some point, the widow's only son became sick and died. The woman begged Elijah to do something, so he did something.

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<sup>13</sup> This was a common and ancient proverb, not only among the Jews, but also among the Greeks and Romans and Chinese.

Elijah prayed for God to restore her son to life - and God did it. The upshot of the story is that the woman came to faith in Elijah's God.

I suspect that Jesus' audience was uncomfortable, might have even been a bit irritated by this story. But He continued, piling on, telling a story about Elijah's successor, the prophet, Elisha. (2 Kings 5)

#### Elisha and the heathen leper (v. 27)

We learn about a man named Naaman who was the commander of the army of the kingdom of Aram, a nearby enemy of Israel. This Naaman was a good man and a valiant warrior. But he was afflicted with leprosy.

The Arameans had recently destroyed a Jewish village in Israel, and among the captives of that village was a young Jewish girl who was brought in to Naaman's house as a maid to Naaman's wife.

The young Jewish girl soon came to greatly respect Naaman. She told him that the Jewish prophet Elisha could heal him of his leprosy, and she urged him to go to Elisha.

Naaman got permission from the king to go to Israel to seek healing from Elisha.

When Naaman stood before Elisha, the prophet told Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan River seven times, promising that this ritual would cleanse him from leprosy.

Naaman was furious! Elisha was obviously a fraud - there were better rivers in Aram than the dirty Jordan. Naaman turned on his heel and headed back toward Aram.

But his servants begged him to do what the prophet said.

***[2 Kings 5:14] So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, in accordance with the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.***

The healing was wonderful, but the high point of this story comes when Naaman turns in true faith to the God of Israel.<sup>14</sup>

Now that we know these stories as Jesus' audience in the synagogue in Nazareth certainly would have known them, listen to the way Jesus tells these two stories to His family and lifelong friends.

***[25] "But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a severe famine came over all the land; [26] and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. [27] And there were many with leprosy in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."***

Jesus' point?

The prophets Elijah and Elisha bestowed their miraculous benefits on outsiders. Now, that was really not remarkable, since God loves all people.

What was remarkable was that Jesus highlighted that the prophets did NOT do the same miracles for the Jews. Jesus was drawing a parallel between the Jews of the prophets' generation and those before Him in the synagogue.

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<sup>14</sup> There is a twist to this story, which the residents of Nazareth would have known, which makes this story even more of a wake-up call to those in the synagogue on this particular Sabbath. The twist concerns a man named Gehazi, who was Elisha's servant (an Israelite). Gehazi thought that it was a shame that Naaman's money had not been received in payment for the miracle. So, he ran after Naaman's chariot and told him that Elisha had changed his mind and that, yes, as a matter of fact, he

could use some of that money after all. Well, Naaman was more than happy to oblige and gave a bunch of money and changes of clothing to Gehazi (presumably for Elisha, but really for Gehazi!). Gehazi's little plan of keeping the blessing for himself appeared to be working until he stood before Elisha. God had revealed to Elisha what Gehazi had done, and so Elisha brought down the curse of leprosy on Gehazi and his descendants because of his greed.

Neither generation of Jews recognized greatness when they saw it. The one didn't recognize mighty prophets. The other didn't recognize the Messiah.

Jesus told the stories of the widow and Namaan as a call to repentance.

He was calling the people to see Him, not as the little boy they used to know in Nazareth, but as the Messiah He now obviously is.

Tragically, the call to repentance fell on deaf ears.

### **Response to Jesus' First Illustration! (vv. 28-30)**

*Jesus' synagogue audience was enraged v. 28)*

***[28] And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage<sup>15</sup> as they heard these things...***

They didn't like being compared unfavorably to heathen who were blessed by God. So, the worship service erupted into violence.

*The murder attempt was miraculously unsuccessful (vv. 29-30)*

***[29] and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the crest of the hill on which their city had been built,<sup>16</sup> so that they could throw Him down from the cliff.***

They seemed to have Jesus right in their grasp, right in their power. ***[30] But He passed through their midst and went on His way.***

How did that happen? The way Luke records it, it was a miracle. The power of God is at work here.

Well, they had been demanding that He perform a miracle, but this sure wasn't what they had in mind.

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<sup>15</sup> Petty town pride was insulted too, as the added implication was that Nazareth was no better than Capernaum, if as good.

The miracle Jesus performs is a miracle of concealment.

So, inside the synagogue, they had hoped to get a magic show and were rewarded with a call to repentance. Outside, at the cliff, they were hoping to kill Jesus, and He miraculously eluded their grasp.

### **Conclusion:**

The events on that Sabbath in Nazareth marked the beginning of serious opposition to Jesus. It served as a turning point in His life.

Here as we close our look at this scene from Jesus' life are two thoughts for reflection that could serve as a turning point for us, today.

**FIRST**, look at the beautiful mission of Jesus.

He claimed the words of Isaiah about the Messiah as His own. He said that He was going to devote His life to people in desperate need. People who are poor, in captivity, blind, and oppressed are going to make up His target audience.

Jesus' mission is a mission of liberation and reclamation. If you page through the Gospels, you'll see Him spending much of His time liberating and restoring needy people.

Poor people got the great news that eternal riches could be theirs if they would believe and follow Him. Those who were poor in spirit would inherit God's kingdom.

People held captive in prisons or even in slavery were promised the freedom of a relationship with God. Those held captive by addictions could find release through His power.

Those who were blind to God and His ways would gain sight to see Him when they believed.

<sup>16</sup> Nazareth was built on a hill, and at the southwest corner of the town of Nazareth such a cliff as Luke mentions exists today overhanging a Roman Catholic convent.

Those oppressed by disease and loss and tragedy would find joy in Him, even while they weep.

Today, rejoice that if Jesus has benefitted you at all, it is because you are among the poor, blind, captive, and oppressed. These are the people Jesus came to deliver. He delivered you. That's you.

You are exactly the type of person for whom He was sent. People like you and me are His target audience. Rejoice!

**SECOND**, we also see the ugly rejection of Jesus and His mission. Their rejection begs the question, "*Why?*"

Well, He had just told them about God's expansive love for a solitary foreign widow and for the foreigner, Namaan.

Immediately, the people who had known Jesus the longest and best, His family and friends, tried to throw Him off a cliff. Luke tells us, **[28] ALL the people were filled with rage.** At those stories.

As I've wrestled with this rejection over the week, I have returned time and again to this thought: They objected to the expansion of God's reach beyond themselves.

God's reach was expansive, theirs was narrow, confined.

They wanted Messianic power for themselves but objected to it being unleashed on the world. They were happy receiving Jesus' gifts of heaven's wealth and spiritual sight. For the outsider? Not so much.

The crowd's rage is a warning to insiders who have received Jesus' gracious gifts and want to hoard them.

The proper response of poor, blind, captive and oppressed people who have been liberated is extreme gratitude and passion to spread the news that what Jesus has done for us, He wants to do for all.

Having received the amazing grace of Jesus ourselves, we gladly share that all-inclusive, expansive, universal, worldwide love of Jesus with others.