

+ Luke 4:20-32 + When God Speaks, Are You Listening? +
+ Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany + 31 January 2010 +

A preschooler plays hard in her room. Her imagination runs free as she plays with dolls in her dollhouse. Her dad tells the little girl to pick up the mess left in the wake of her playtime, but the little girl never hears a word. She's too busy playing. Dad tells her again, but still she doesn't pay attention. Soon he asks, "Are you listening?"

A teen nears victory in a video game. He's nearly reached the final level. Mom has supper baking in the oven, but she has to run errands. She tells the young man to take the food out of the oven when the timer goes off. The young man barely responds, "Uh-huh" as mom rushes out the door. Later mom gets home and finds dinner well overcooked. "Are you listening?"

A husband plops down in front of the TV after a busy day at work. He turns on the news. His wife tells him all about what happened that day. Unfortunately he pays more attention to the sports scores and the top stories than what she has to say. He sprinkles the conversation with a few unthinking "uh-huhs", but when she asks him a question that needs more of an answer, all she can ask is "Are you listening?" Three simple words that make us cringe, but a question each of us needs to ask ourselves as we consider the Gospel lesson from Luke 4 this morning. **Read Text**

It all started out so pleasantly. The local boy Jesus had become a rabbi. The people in Nazareth had known Yeshua Ben-Yosef (Jesus Son of Joseph) from little on. They figured he'd follow in his father's footsteps as a carpenter, but surely he'd make a fine rabbi too. Jesus was starting to gain quite a reputation elsewhere in Galilee and they were proud of him.

Their initial reaction should really be no surprise, then, when Jesus visited his home synagogue there in Nazareth one Sabbath. He was asked to read from Scripture and expound on it. When given the scroll of the prophets, Jesus read from Isaiah 61, ***"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."***

The eyes of all were eagerly fastened on Jesus to see how he would explain this passage that clearly pointed to the promised Messiah. As was the custom, Jesus sat down and began, ***"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*** With their own ears, the people of Nazareth heard the fulfillment of that prophecy. There before them sat the Messiah bringing spiritual help, sight, and deliverance. So how did they react? Luke tells us, ***"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' they asked."***

They were impressed. They were amazed. They were pleased with what they had heard, but were they really listening? It seems they were really more impressed with how Jesus had spoken than on what he spoken. They were impressed with his preaching and amazed at his eloquence, but ignored his message. Now some may have wondered if Jesus was, indeed, the promised Messiah, but we get the impression that in spite of all the nice things they said, no one was really listening. ***"Isn't this Joseph's son?"***

They had become all too familiar with Jesus and as the proverb goes—familiarity breeds contempt. These people had seen Jesus grow up or had grown up with him. They knew (or thought they knew) his parents, Joseph and Mary. Joseph had been a poor carpenter and it wasn't just the elderly women who wondered about Jesus' age and the timing of Mary's pregnancy. Yes, Jesus had been an intelligent young man, but ***"Isn't this Joseph's son?"*** How could he be the promised Messiah? He was just a carpenter's kid who grew up to be a popular rabbi. No one was listening.

It's easy to look down on Nazareth with contempt, isn't it? How could they be so foolish? How could they not hear what Jesus was clearly telling them? How could they not listen? It's so easy to look down on the people of Nazareth, but **when God speaks, are you listening?** Isn't that what starts to make you feel a little uncomfortable about this text, because you know you, too, haven't always listened when God speaks through his Word?

Week in and week out you come here to God's house to hear the Word in Sunday School and Bible Study and worship, but are you listening to what God is saying through his Word or just hoping to come away with an insignificant little tip to get you through the rest of your week? How many of us haven't perhaps daydreamed our way through a sermon and suddenly we get to the "Amen" and if asked what the sermon was about, we could only weakly respond with "Jesus" or "the Bible"? How many of us haven't perhaps lost our focus while reading a portion of God's Word and then wondered minutes later if I can remember what I just read? How many of us haven't paid more attention to the delivery and the presentation rather than the message and the substance while studying the Word or worshipping with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Not listening when God speaks isn't something that stopped happening 2000 years ago, but it can get worse—familiarity can breed contempt in us too.

As the all-knowing God, Jesus knew what was in the hearts and on the minds of the Nazarenes. He knew they needed to hear a message they didn't want to hear. ***"Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal***

yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.” **“I tell you the truth,”** he continued, **“no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 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. 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.”** Was Jesus being offensive? Not at all. They selfishly expected Jesus to perform miracles and prove he was the Messiah, because they rejected him as the Messiah. So Jesus had to warn them that such selfish expectations could lead to God’s Gospel going elsewhere. He reminded them that when their ancestors were unfaithful, God took his grace elsewhere—to a Gentile widow and a Syrian general.

Saying that the Lord had favored Gentiles over Jews only enraged the people in the synagogue and the crowd quickly turned on him. **“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.”** How could people who knew Jesus and his Word so well nearly rush him off a cliff to his death? When God spoke, they didn’t listen.

Our lesson is not one of the most pleasant accounts in Holy Scripture, but you and I need to hear it, because it makes us cringe. Do you always want to hear what Jesus has to tell you? How do you react when you hear the holy voice of God’s Law pointing out how you have proven selfish rather than selfless, loveless rather than loving? By nature, we sinfully rebel against such bad news, but how much aren’t you and I like those Nazarenes when the Lord speaks to us through his Word here on Sunday morning and we completely disregard him during the week? When we disregard what God says in his Word, we push him out of the way to ignore our way into hell.

There’s another warning for us too. Could such disregard move God to take his Word away from us? Martin Luther once said that the Word is like a rain cloud that drops rain on one area and then moves on to shower another. Could the Lord do the same thing to us? Yes, he could. Luke tells us, **“[Jesus] walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”**

Yet there is still grace, still forgiveness, still deliverance even for those who fail to listen like you and me. Jesus had just been rejected by his own people, but yet it was not his time to die. He still had to continue his long journey to pay for the sins of all mankind. In spite of their rejection, the people of Nazareth could not stop God. In his grace, Jesus allowed them to live to again hear his saving good news of their forgiveness, but a time was coming when Jesus would allow his enemies to put him to death. Three years later, Jesus would allow those who rejected him to pierce his hands and feet with nails to a cross to forgive their sins too. Ultimately, he would overcome the world’s rejection to save the world, even you and me.

When Jesus went on his way, he also showed his grace in that others would hear and receive with real joy and amazement his precious good news of help for the spiritually poor, freedom for the spiritually oppressed, and sight for the spiritually blind. Just one verse after Jesus left Nazareth, Luke tells us, **“Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.”**

Isn’t that remarkable? By his grace, the Lord opened ears to hear and hearts to believe his message of deliverance. People **“were amazed at his teaching, because his message had divine authority.”** It came from God himself. Isn’t it remarkable that the Lord still shares his good news in spite of our natural rejection or failure to listen? Isn’t it remarkable that the Lord still enables you and me to listen when the Law kills and the Gospel heals? Isn’t it remarkable that hearts are still amazed at Jesus’ teaching even after all these centuries, even here, even now? Christ still speaks and hearts are still changed and ears, like yours and mine, still listen. The Lord in his grace still speaks to us through his Word, giving us more than insignificance for the week, instead giving us forgiveness, hope, peace, purpose, joy, confidence, blessedness, self-control, and finally eternal life. Now when Jesus makes a promise in his Word, we can take him at his word, because he has proven time and again he is who he says he is—our Savior. Just as remarkably, he also opens ears when we share his Good News too.

So you listen when God speaks through his Word here in worship. You listen when God speaks through his Word in Sunday School or Bible Study. You listen when God speaks through his Word in your family and private devotions. Through faith in him, you listen when God speaks because what he has to tell you is always the most important thing you ever need to hear. Like the people of Capernaum, we sit in amazement at the feet of Jesus and marvel at what he has to say, because his words are light and life. So are you listening? When God speaks through his Word, I pray he finds you sitting at his feet ever eager to hear what he has to say and ever amazed at his marvelous teaching. Amen.