

The Cast | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

“The Locals”

Luke 4.14-30

January 31, 2016

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. ¹⁵ And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all.

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. ¹⁷ And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, ¹⁹ TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." ²⁰ And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. ²¹ And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" ²³ And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" ²⁴ And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. 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 great 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 lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; ²⁹ and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. ³⁰ But passing through their midst, He went His way.

We're looking at the supporting cast in the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (mostly Luke as it turns out THIS year) and these bystanders and characters who meet the Main Character...as they meet Him and interact with Him...we, the readers, see Him, Jesus Christ more clearly.

Today we look at “The Locals”, this group of Church Members in His home church...the synagogue He attended with His family in the little town of Nazareth in the Northern Region of Palestine/Israel.

His interaction with them is VERY telling...He unfolds His job-description as The Messiah. He claims that title for Himself (the Anointed One, "Mesh-i-ach") and immediately there's big, big controversy (a foreshadow of things to come)... Apparently, HIS understanding of what the Savior IS and their vision are very different... He confronts some of their most deeply cherished ideas about God, about Scripture, about humanity and the course of history, the mission of God...the purpose of life.

You've heard the phrase, "the third rail" i.e. an issue so controversial that it's "charged" and "untouchable" to the extent that any politician or public official who dares to broach the subject will suffer politically... well, Jesus preaches the world's shortest sermon...and He jumps RIGHT ON "the third rail".

It becomes an opportunity for US to think about our OWN expectations of a Savior...What do we want to be saved FROM? What do we think is good and evil; "us and them"? What's wrong with the world that needs to be fixed...how do we think will a Savior would fix it? What does it mean to believe in Him...and are you sure YOU DO? The Locals are a study in expectations.

Let's look at: 1) The Savior We WANT

2) The Savior WE NEED (and GET)

This IS the introductory (inaugural) moment for Jesus of Nazareth. He steps now into the public realm and is sort of declaring Himself. He was baptized and as water was poured on His head then the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased." (3.22).

Then He is led...IN the security of that IDENTITY and in the Power of the Holy Spirit...He is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Then He returns to His hometown synagogue, IN the power of the Spirit...and He is asked to READ in the synagogue worship service. He reads from the Prophet Isaiah chapters 61 and 58...and He sits down to preach the sermon (because sermons should always be delivered from a seated position!)

His first recorded sermon (in Luke) is very short: He sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were FIXED on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (20-21)

He has quoted (as the Scripture TEXT)...a favorite passage in this town of Nazareth...it's a settlement town. It was founded as a Jewish enclave...the region was changing...Galilee of the Gentiles it was often called (Isa. 9.1)...but Nazareth was determined to stay PURE and uncontaminated... a very conservative, very Jewish town.

It's hard to imagine living in a region...that was once a kind monolithic population...a single ethnicity (in this case entirely Jewish) and then... it changes. The region is flooded with OTHER races and nationalities and... isn't it hard to imagine living in that kind of place?

"Well, no, T.J., we ARE LIVING in that kind of place..." and YES we ARE!

And within that changing region, NAZARETH...is an enclave...a breakwater, a levee to stem the tide of Gentile incursion...to keep it the way it was...before those other races moved in.

Nazareth was ...maybe...a little like a town nearby us... sort of established to stay like the good ol' days ... this local town in this region flooded with immigrants and outsiders... was founded with a kind of Old Fashioned Western theme...the name of this local town rhymes with a saucy liquid that's poured over Roast Beef or Turkey...

T.J., are you saying that the Messiah, Jesus Christ grew up in Davie? Well, yeah...sort of...and I mean no disrespect to Davie and none to Nazareth...

And in this very conservative town...a Jewish town...a town surrounded by Gentiles...a bastion... they really liked verses from the Hebrew Bible that highlighted God's intentions to restore Israel to it's former greatness...and that's the passage Jesus chose (or was assigned to read) Isaiah ch. 61...and yet...He changed it a little.

He imports a bit of Isaiah 58 about "SETTING FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED" ...and most conspicuously, Jesus of Nazareth stopped before He got to the best part (the part the Locals liked best!) ...Had He read another sentence it would've said, "And the day of vengeance of our God..." (Isa 61.2).

"But He deliberately left out the part where the vengeance of God falls on those terrible Gentiles and drives them out of our PURE Nazareth."

The initial response to this short sermon SEEMS to be positive...but I'm not sure we get it right. The great NT scholar Joachim Jeremias points out that the words "speaking well" in v. 22 are really just "speaking about"...and the King James Version has it "And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?"

In other words...He leaves off the part about "vengeance" (their favorite part) and they're puzzled saying, "WHY only grace...where's the JUSTICE against the bad people...He should know: we like to STRESS that around here...after all He grew up here (Joseph's son!)

And then (even if it was initially positive...and I'm convinced that it wasn't) but then the response goes south fast when the Preacher confirms what they THINK they hear Him saying,

“You insiders and locals in this insular (inward-looking) town want me to do some healing and perform some of the miracles you’ve been hearing about (Physician heal yourself!)...join the Good Ol’ Boys...show us You’re on our side... But “IT’S YOU, says Jesus, “WHO ARE NOT ON MY SIDE.”

“In fact a prophet is never welcome in his hometown.”

And then the preacher really grabs that third rail directly... He says, “THINK of the great prophets you know...think of Elijah...apparently not welcomed by the insiders...he was sent to the outsiders...he provided miraculously NOT for a Jewish widow...but for a Phoenician...a GENTILE... He did an act of mercy for an outsider (“Ugh! There He goes again with the outsiders! Didn’t He learn anything growing up here?!”)

Then a second illustration...Elisha (protégé of Elijah) and while there were many lepers in Israel HE COULD HAVE HEALED...He instead healed an enemy of Israel... the Syrian general named Naaman. (2 Kings 5)

And now they are “filled with rage!”

“What we THOUGHT we heard Him saying, He is NOW confirming and emphasizing ‘ad nauseam’ – He’s over the top! He’s ...not for us and our kind...I frankly question His patriotism! No miracles for us?”

And they are so...ticked off...so enraged...they want to kill Him...they drive Him OUT OF THE CITY and to a cliff (must’ve been quite a scene!)...going to throw Him down and if he doesn’t die they’ll finish Him off with stones... And then maybe they get that miracle “passing through their midst...He went on His way” Maybe...not the miracle they wanted but it does seem miraculous.

The Savior they WANT...the Savior we ALL want... is one of US. We want someone who reinforces OUR prejudices, and supports OUR likes and dislikes. Truth is HE LOOKS LIKE US...talks like us...votes like us...dresses like US...HE IS ON OUR SIDE.

When Joshua, the General (Moses’ successor) was preparing for battle against Jericho...he’s apparently alone (maybe praying) he looks up and sees a Stranger. It’s a military Man...with a sword in His hand...and Joshua asks, “Are you for US ...OR for our adversaries?”

And the answer is, “No.”

Here’s the text from Joshua ch. 5: He said, "No; rather I ... come now as captain of the host of the LORD." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him, "What has my lord to say to his servant?" The captain of the LORD'S host said to Joshua, "Remove your sandals ... for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so." (5. 3-15)

Many scholars think this was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ...and tying these two passages together, the lesson we take away is, "The Real Savior is NOT on the side of Nazareth and the locals...not on the side of "people like us" (however you define the US)...HE IS NOT EVEN FOR THE ONE NATION THAT HE HIMSELF FOUNDED (not for the Israelites)

We want to ask, "Is He for India...or the U.S.? Is He for this kind of people or that kind of people...for progressive open minded types or traditional family-values types...IS HE FOR US OR FOR THEM?..."

AND the answer is ... "NO!"

The Savior we want is coercible ... and we can coerce him...can pressure and cajole him to do what we want... BUT THE REAL SAVIOR, the One we need... IS NOT A TAME LION.

He comes for outsiders...for those who are broken and who know their brokenness...the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed, the outsider...all the categories in Isaiah's prophecy.

He is a Savior who joins the broken...the time will come (later in the Story) when once again He will be judged by the insiders and then driven through a city to the outskirts of town and to the brow of a Hill but He will NOT pass through their midst this time ...and there He will be lynched... and not simply facing the rage of people...but the vengeance of God will fall on HIM...HE WILL BE DYING FOR BLIND AND BAD AND MORALLY DESTITUTE PEOPLE LIKE ME...He will not be dying for Americans or Chileans or Republicans or Democrats... He will be crucified for the Needy, for those who see their own blindness and put no confidence in their own reputation or record or goodness or status or possessions.

He dies for people like those in the examples Jesus used, ONE of an outsider who believed (the widow who gave Elijah her last morsels of food because she believed in Elijah's God) ...and the other, that haughty, proud general (Naaman) who was told to bathe in the muddy waters of the Jordan...and even though Naaman was insulted...he had nothing to lose...He did what Elisha said...he repented of his pride and washed...and he was saved from leprosy.

Two outsiders who repented and believed...who humbled themselves and trusted...THAT'S whom the Real Savior is come to save... Are you on OUR side or theirs? "NO! I'm for the broken...those who fall and can't get up...and for THEM...I will be crucified..."

Jesus Christ cheats death in today's passage...but eventually He will be taken to another Hill and He will not cheat death that time...or...will HE?

He will indeed pass through their midst and go on His way...He will cheat death in the ultimate sense: He will KILL death...by becoming as BROKEN as can be.

The center of the reading...from Isaiah (if you look at the literary structure) is "Recovery of sight to the BLIND". And right after that is spoken the text says, "They fixed their EYES on Him..."

And the great irony is ...because they THOUGHT they could see (because THEY were insiders!)... they could NOT. Had they come, humble like Namaan and the Widow of Sidon and in desperation said, "Lord, I don't see...help me...heal me...fix my eyes" THEN, He would have favored them...that's why He came: to give favor, to give grace to the needy.

And when we're seeing our blindness...when in desperation and faith we fix our eyes on Him...when we begin to really see how needy we are and we trust him...like that widow/Namaan...THEN we attach to Him...He is the Head and we the Body...

We join Him in His heart for the oppressed, the blind, the captives, ensnared... we can relate to them BECAUSE WE SEE OUR OWN BLINDNESS AND MORAL DESTITUTION...and "they" become people we can relate to because WE know how it feels to be outsiders and broken and bankrupt ...and we can move toward them as fellow poor people.

AND it only happens...as we meet Him...the Savior who joined the needy...the Savior we really need.