

A Prophet In His Hometown

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[0 : 01] Good morning to all of you. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector of Church of the Advent, and so I'm delighted to welcome you here. And I know that this has been an especially heavy week in our community and in our city with the plane crash.

I know many of you are struggling with job insecurity right now, and I'm deeply sorry for that. And I think that you're in the right place. I'm glad that we can gather together to worship, to pray, to hear God's Word preached.

I'm just thankful to be here. There's nowhere I'd rather be when things are challenging. We wanna open God's Word together, and we're gonna look at this passage in Luke chapter four.

And it raises this question of, you know, have you ever wondered what it would be like to be able to go to church and to hear Jesus preach the sermon? You know, to get to this part of the service, Hillary stands up, she reads the text for the day, and then Jesus comes up, and Jesus is about to preach a sermon.

You know, a lot of people think about that, and I've actually heard people say, you know, I'm not a Christian, but if I could actually just meet Jesus face-to-face, if Jesus would appear to me face-to-face, and if Jesus were to just appear to me and say, it's all true, I'm the Savior, I'm the Messiah, then I would believe it.

[1 : 26] But I just need some proof to get me there. And I've, in earlier times in my life, have thought the same thing. And the question we wanna ask this morning is, is that really the case?

Would it really be that cut and dry? Because what we see in our gospel reading makes us question that. In Luke chapter four, Jesus stands up, he preaches a sermon, and essentially the through line of his sermon, the main idea is, I am God's Messiah, and I have been sent to the world as a fulfillment of God's promises.

And Jesus preaches that sermon, and it doesn't result in mass conversions. This sermon almost gets him killed. And so we're gonna look more at this, we're gonna talk about what it means for us. We're gonna look at the context, the meaning, and then ultimately the implications. So let's pray and ask God to help us as we open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we ask now that your Holy Spirit would illuminate your word.

And we pray that through your ministry to us, through your word, you would do your work in us. We are all here desperately needing what only you can provide. And we pray that you would do this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ.

[2 : 42] Amen. So first, I wanna catch you up and help you understand the context of what's going on here. By this point in Jesus's ministry, he's been baptized, he's been tempted in the wilderness, he has begun his public ministry, he's been doing some things in Capernaum that have earned him some notoriety.

So there's a buzz circulating about this rabbi, Jesus, and the amazing things that he can do. And so it's a big deal when Jesus finally returns to his hometown of Nazareth, which is kind of a backwater town, mostly insignificant.

Not on anybody's radar is a place where anything of any import would happen. So Jesus comes Sabbath, like every good Jew, he goes to the synagogue. And when people begin to realize that Jesus himself is the one who's gonna give the message, they're excited.

And so people pack in, and they're craning their necks, and they're dying to know what he's gonna say. So Jesus takes the scroll from the attendant. This is what they used to do when it was time. It's a lot like what we do today. He takes the scroll, and he unrolls it to this place in Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 61, and then he reads these words.

[3 : 55] The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Now this is an amazing passage. It's mostly Isaiah 61, but also a little bit taken from Isaiah 58. But it essentially lays out the entire mission of God's Messiah. That's what anointed one means.

It means the Messiah. And it lays out his mission. The Messiah's gonna come, and he's gonna bring good news to the poor. He's gonna bring about the return of exiles from captivity.

He's gonna bring sight to the blind. He's gonna bring liberation for the oppressed. And at this time in history, the Jews placed an enormous amount of hope in this passage.

They interpreted it according to what they believed they most needed. The Messiah's gonna come, he's gonna overthrow the Romans. He's gonna vindicate Israel. He's gonna restore us to our former glory.

[5 : 03] He's gonna be from the line of David. And so when he comes, it's gonna be like the good old days when David was our king, the high point in their history. So Jesus reads this passage.

Everybody, the tension just goes up in the room. Everybody's hyped. Everybody's excited. And Jesus sits down and begins to preach. Everyone's craning their necks. And Luke gives us the essence of his message.

When you see a summary like this, it's essentially a summary of Jesus's sermon. And here's Jesus's sermon main idea. Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

So that's the main idea of his sermon. Jesus begins to explain to them how he is the fulfillment of this messianic prophecy. He is the one that Israel has been waiting for.

He says, the time has come, the kingdom is here, and I am that kingdom. And look at how the people respond. At first, it seems like the sermon's going really well. He has them eating out of his hand, right?

[6 : 07] They're all, and they start to nod their heads, and it says they're speaking favorably about him, and they're nudging one another and saying, this is absolutely amazing. But then things take a turn.

Someone recognizes them. They say, aren't you Joseph's son? And all of a sudden, the mood in the room begins to shift, and people begin to realize, oh, this is that Jesus who is from here.

And people say, I remember watching you run around as a snot-nosed kid. I remember seeing you working next to your dad in the shop, fixing things, and covered in sweat and sawdust.

And they begin to realize that this isn't some far-off, exalted rabbi. This is that Jesus, Joseph's son, Mary's son. And then the whole thing begins to take a turn, and Jesus senses what's about to come, the very next question out of their mouths.

He knows what they're thinking, and he anticipates it. He says in verse 23, doubtless, you know, now that you're doubting this, now that you're doubting me, doubtless you're gonna quote to me this proverb.

[7 : 16] Physician, heal yourself. What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well. In other words, Jesus says, I know what you're thinking. You want me to prove it.

You want me to do some miraculous sign. You want me to heal somebody. You want me to do what I did in Capernaum. You want me to do that here and prove that I am who I say I am. They want to see a show.

And here's where we see Jesus's incredible boldness. It'd be very tempting in this moment to just say, okay, here you go. And you just kind of do a miracle. Is that enough? You want to see more? But that's not what he does. He's not trying to win a popularity contest. He's a prophet. And he's going to speak truth whether they like it or not. And so first he says this.

He says, truly I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. In other words, when it comes to recognizing true prophets who have been sent from God, Israel does not have the best track record.

[8 : 15] So why would anyone think that these people would be able to recognize God's own son, even if he comes, stands in front of them, and says directly exactly who he is?

He says, we don't have a great track record of recognizing true prophets when they come. And then he reminds them of two events from their past. Now these are sore subjects for Israelites.

He says, you know, there was a time when the great prophet Elijah, during a famine in Israel, many died. Many died from the famine. And there were many widows left alone.

And he's like, but do you remember what happened? God only sent Elijah to bless a woman in Zarephath. All these other people died. And then his successor, Elisha, he says, though many in Israel had leprosy, God only sent Elisha to heal a Syrian named Naaman.

And we say, well, what does this mean? It seems like a non-sequitur, but in fact, it's not at all a non-sequitur. The widow in Zarephath, she was poor, dirt poor.

[9 : 24] She was also a Gentile. She's a spiritual outsider. She's a racial and ethnic outsider. She's a heretic and an idol worshiper. And he says, remember that time when all those people were struggling?

God only sent the prophet Elijah to her. And then he says, remember the time that he sent Elisha to Naaman? Well, Naaman wasn't poor. He was very wealthy. Also a Gentile.

He was a foreign military commander who had actually fought against Israel. He was also an idol worshiper. And he was a leper. So Jesus is reminding these people of times when, although there was plenty of legitimate need, plenty of need among the Israelites, God sent his prophets to help Gentiles instead of Israelites.

And you gotta understand, if you're a first century Jew and you live in a place like Nazareth and you see Gentiles all around and you're very concerned about keeping yourself separate from the Gentiles and you hear Jesus saying this, this is deeply offensive.

The Jews had always imagined God's Messiah coming to vindicate them over and above the Gentiles. And Jesus is reminding them of times in their past when God did something very different.

[10 : 39] He actually sent his prophets to the Gentiles instead of the Israelites. So this is a slap in the face to their pride as people. And it says in verse 28, when they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.

So they literally drive Jesus out of the synagogue. They drive him out of the town. They drive him up to the edge of a cliff and they intend to throw him off the cliff and kill him. But Jesus is able to mysteriously pass through their midst and he goes away to Capernaum.

Now in order to understand this, we have to understand that every single thing that Jesus is saying is a continuation of his sermon on Isaiah chapter 61.

He does not get derailed by their skepticism and go in a different direction. All of this is expounding upon Isaiah 61. God has sent his Messiah Jesus into the world to bring good news to the poor, return for the exiles, sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed.

But here's the point that Jesus is making. Unless you recognize that you are spiritually poor, the coming of Jesus is going to be irrelevant.

[11 : 54] Unless you recognize that you are right now a spiritual exile, the coming of Jesus is not going to be good news. Unless you recognize that you right now are spiritually blind, Jesus has nothing to offer you.

Unless you recognize that you are in fact spiritually possessed, spiritually oppressed by death, by sin, by the demonic, the liberation of Jesus, the freedom that he offers is meaningless.

Unless you recognize your need and unless you're willing to look to Jesus, he has nothing to offer. And this is a slap in the face to the Israelites because they always assumed that the Messiah was going to come for them only.

But Jesus is saying this, God does not send his Savior to a people group. He does not send his Messiah to the Jews. He does not send his Messiah to the Gentiles.

He does not send his Messiah only to the poor. He does not send his Messiah to the wealthy. He sends his Savior only to those who truly know they need a Savior.

[13 : 09] Whether they are Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, morally upright, morally bankrupt. He sends his Savior only to those who know they need a Savior.

And this becomes very clear in the next chapter in Luke. The religious leaders are scandalized when they see Jesus, who's this respectable rabbi, eating with the very worst kind of people.

In Luke chapter 5, they see him eating with sinners and tax collectors. sinners. And they're scandalized. And Jesus responds this way. He says, those who are well have no need of a physician. You don't go to the doctor when you're well.

You don't value the doctor when you're well. You don't seek out the doctor when you're well. It's those who are sick. He says, I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

And this really brings us to the point. At the beginning, we talked about people who think, if I could just hear Jesus stand up in front of me and say directly to me that I am God's Messiah, if Jesus would do that, then I would believe because I would have proof.

[14:19] But here we see in Luke chapter 4 that that is far from the truth. It's not that simple. Jesus does that very thing. He stands up in front of a crowd of people and says, I am God's Messiah.

And they reject him. That's because the primary obstacle to faith is not intellectual. Those of us who think, if I could just have some proof, it is not intellectual.

It is spiritual. These people want a champion. They want a political hero. They want somebody to make them feel proud to be Israelites. They want somebody to stand up to the Romans.

The last thing they want is a savior because that means that they are the sort of people who need saving. And that's the rub for most of us if we're really honest is that fundamentally down deep we don't actually believe that.

These people are blinded by their own pride so they can't recognize Jesus for who he is even when he's standing right in front of them. You know, this is like the story of Joy Davidman.

[15:24] She was a poet. She was a committed atheist. At one point in her life she joined the Communist Party because she thought that that would offer the kind of meaning and focus on justice that mattered to her and she says this about her atheism.

She says, of course I thought atheism was true but I hadn't given quite enough attention to developing the proof of it. Someday when the children grow older I'd work it out.

So she's like, I'm sure there's no God. I don't really, can't get there intellectually but one of these days I'll sit down and I'll do my homework but I already know there's no God. And she was very confident about that. And she marries a man named Bill and Bill is a workaholic.

He is chronically unfaithful. He's an alcoholic. He's kind of a train wreck. And one day Bill calls from his New York office.

He calls Joy and he's in the midst of a nervous breakdown. And from the phone conversation she's deeply worried that he's gonna take his own life. And he says he's in the middle of a breakdown.

[16:26] He doesn't know what to do and then he hangs up the phone. And then for the entire next day she's frantically calling the New York office trying to get through, trying to find out what happened to him and she can't get through and she has no idea if he's alive or dead.

And by nightfall that next night she recalls there's nothing to do but wait and see if he turns up alive or dead. So she has no idea if her husband is even still alive. And so she talks about that night. She puts her children to sleep and then she just waits. And here's what she writes about what happens next. In that silence something happened. For the first time in my life, Joy writes, I felt helpless.

For the first time my pride was forced to admit that I was not calm after all. That I was not the master of my fate and the captain of my soul.

All my defenses, all the walls of arrogance and cockiness and self-love behind which I had hidden from God went down momentarily and God came in.

[17:31] It's like for this brief moment she feels utterly helpless. Her walls go down and in that moment she says, God came in. There was a person with me in that room directly present to my consciousness.

A person so real that all my previous life was by comparison a mere shadow play. And I myself was more alive than I had ever been. It was like waking from sleep.

Now of course God had been there all along. Jesus had been there all along. But it wasn't until she felt her own helplessness.

It wasn't until that illusion of her self-sufficiency crumbled. It wasn't until that moment that she became aware of the presence of God with her.

That is what enabled her to recognize Jesus who was standing right in front of her. And it's this experience that leads her to convert to Christianity which profoundly changed her life.

[18:33] And by the way the epilogue is that after Bill eventually survived that night but he eventually left her for her cousin and they got divorced and so Joy went on to marry C.S. Lewis.

And she's the wife that Lewis loved and writes about. And this story of Joy's conversion I think shows us something extremely important.

No one could have argued her into the faith. No amount of cups of coffee and sitting down and laying out all of the rational apologetics for the existence of God or the truth of the resurrection or

the claims of Christ as fulfillments of prophecy.

No one sitting down and laying all of that out would have I would think convinced Joy to give up her atheism. She couldn't be argued into faith.

She needed to be humbled into faith. She had to be humbled into faith. She had to come face to face with her own helplessness. She had to see herself as spiritually poor.

[19 : 40] And then Jesus began to look like good news. She had to see herself as spiritually blind and then Jesus' message began to have relevance for her. It's only at that point that the reality of Jesus becomes plain to see.

Now this is why in terms of implications some people maybe some people in this room remain in unbelief. The problem I would suggest for some of us who remain in unbelief is not primarily intellectual.

I'm not saying there's not a place for intellectual arguments. I'm not saying there's not a place for rational argument and apologetics. And anybody who has seriously looked you will discover that there are incredible thoughtful compelling arguments for the truth of the things that we believe as Christians.

Absolutely. There's incredible compelling evidence that the resurrection happened. There's incredible compelling evidence that this is true. But I would suggest that for some people who remain in unbelief the primary issue is not intellectual.

You're not going to be able to be argued into the faith. Your primary obstacle is spiritual. It's a heart posture issue. And God may love you so much and want you so much that he does things in your life that humble you.

[20 : 58] That he does things in your life that bring you face to face with your finitude, your limitations. that he brings a situation into your life that causes you to feel helpless because he's trying to get through to you.

He's standing right in front of you saying, I am here, the savior, the fulfillment of all of God's promises and all he wants is for you to recognize him instead of throwing him off a cliff.

Right? So that's the first thing. Second implication is this. I do believe this is probably partly why the church, not just our church but the church, is filled with people who have grown up with Christianity, filled with people who have grown up around these truths, who have heard the gospel a thousand times, they've gone to Sunday school, they've gone to youth group, they've gone to the camps, they've done all of it, they've heard it thousands of times.

But it's never really connected with them on a deep level. You know, it's never really penetrated. I think the reason is because maybe you've heard the gospel a thousand times but it's never really moved you because you've never really been confronted with your need for a savior.

You've never really come face to face with the truth of your own condition. In the UVA med school, probably like all med schools, one of the ways that they train students is by having actors come in and they'll give the actor a medical condition and then the actor has to act out the symptoms of the condition and then they bring the med students in to do an exam and their goal is to try to correctly diagnose the condition that's being portrayed.

[22 : 35] And a few years back at UVA, an actor went in and he was told that he was supposed to pretend to have an abdominal aortic aneurysm. And here's the symptoms and you need to pretend like you have this.

And then the med student began to examine this actor and the med student discovered that, in fact, the actor actually had a real abdominal aortic aneurysm.

I mean, can you imagine the odds of that? You go in, you're randomly given a condition. You go in, you're randomly given a condition.