

**January 27, 2019**

**Luke 4: 16-30**

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, We invite you to join us in the study of your word. We ask for wisdom in discerning its meaning, compassion in applying its teaching. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## **Outsiders**

Due to the wonders of syndication, great old television shows never really die. They get second and third and fourth lives on channels such as Antenna TV, ME TV, Nick at Night and TV Land.

I'm currently watching old episodes of "The Good Wife" and "Murphy Brown." Others in our household have never stopped watching "Seinfeld."

There is a famous "Seinfeld" episode known as "The Magic Loogie Theory." In it, Kramer and Newman go to a baseball game that the Mets lose on a Keith Hernandez error. As Hernandez passes them on a concrete ramp after the game, Newman says, "Nice game, pretty boy."

And then they claim that Hernandez spit on them.

Kramer and Newman re-tell the story to Elaine. But Jerry, who's heard it before, debunks it. He grabs a golf club and goes through an elaborate scene in which he mocks their account of how the spit hit Kramer in the head and magically ricocheted onto Newman.

Over and over the camera cuts from Jerry's living room to the baseball stadium, where Kramer's head rocks back when he's spit on. Meanwhile a man on a nearby knoll is filming everything.

The episode is mildly funny on its face. But if you had seen Oliver Stone's recent film *JFK*, you'd recognize it as a parody of the prosecution's Magic Bullet Theory.

No, no, no, claims Kevin Costner in the movie about the Kennedy assassination. There had to be a second shooter besides Lee Harvey Oswald.

No, no, no, claims Jerry Seinfeld in the parody. There had to be a second spitter besides Keith Hernandez.

Sometimes, we have to know the background, the back story, before we understand what an author is doing. What point he is making.

Today's Scripture passage is a prime example of that. If you don't know the Old Testament references, you won't understand the point that Luke – and Jesus – are making. But once you do, it opens up a whole new vista on what they are saying.

So today, we're going to start with two Old Testament stories, then see how Luke uses them when he tells *his* story of Jesus. That Jesus is a champion of the poor, of women, of tax collectors, of prostitutes, of everyone in the human race.

The first story comes from the book of I Kings. (I Kings 17: 8-16) The middle section of I Kings is taken up with fantastic stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

As the story opens, there was a terrible drought in the land, and God called Elijah to Gentile territory – to a town in Sidon called Zarephath. This was not where Jews lived. God instructed Elijah to find a Gentile widow in this Gentile land who would feed him.

Elijah followed God's orders and found the widow and asked for water. She gave it to him. He then asked for bread.

She apologized and said that because of the famine brought on by the drought, all she had was a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug. She was on her way to gather firewood to cook this last bit of food for her and her son, and then they were prepared to die.

Elijah told her not to be afraid, but to make him a little bread first and then to make bread for her and her son. When she did that, her jar of meal and jug of oil miraculously refilled – and stayed filled for as long as the drought continued. (I Kings 17: 14)

The second story is found in II Kings. (II Kings 5: 1-14) Elijah has gone up to heaven, and the new prophet of Israel is his protégé Elisha.

A man named Naaman, the mighty and important commander of the army of a neighboring king – a Gentile king – suffered from leprosy. He heard about the miracle-working prophet of Israel from a young Hebrew slave girl he had taken captive. The young girl served his wife. She told her mistress that the prophet of Israel could cure her husband of his leprosy.

So Naaman's king sent Naaman to Israel's king. And Israel's king sent him to Elisha.

Elisha told this important military commander to wash seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman ranted and raved because he thought that was a stupid thing to do. Weren't the rivers in his native Damascus better than this silly river in Israel? he shouted.

But his servants prevailed upon him, and he stomped down to the Jordan and immersed himself seven times.

And when he emerged **“his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.”** (II Kings 5: 14)

OK, so there's our background. These stories were part of the Holy Scripture for Jesus and all the people of his homeland. The Jewish prophets Elijah and Elisha were mighty heroes of Judaism.

So now Luke is going to write a story about the first time Jesus came to Nazareth to preach in his hometown synagogue. Nazareth was a small town, and people had been hearing that Jesus was healing people in Capernaum. Word about him was spreading, and the people were eager to hear their native son, this young man who grew up right in their dusty little town.

In the past two years at Triune, we have dedicated Channie Quinn Gibbs and Walter Malwitz. It would be as if Channie Quinn and Walter grew up and became famous preachers, and came back to preach at Triune for the first time.

We would all be asking, "Isn't that Harry and Debbie's granddaughter? Isn't that Elizabeth and Andrew's son?"

*Well, let's see what they have to say.*

Please turn in your Bibles to **Luke 4: 16-24**, and let's see what happened when Jesus came home to preach.

16 When (Jesus) came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup>and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup>The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

<sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

<sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

<sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'<sup>22</sup>All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

<sup>23</sup>He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." '

<sup>24</sup>And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.'

You've all heard this story. At first, everybody spoke well of Jesus. They bragged on his speaking skills.

But then they begin asking, *Isn't this Joseph's son? Isn't this Joseph's son?* And while that doesn't sound threatening to us, apparently Jesus saw that those words carried disdain.

He said, **"No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."**

Mark and Matthew tell pretty much the same story. At first the crowd was amazed by Jesus' learning, then they recognized his ordinariness – they remembered who his mother and father and brothers and sisters were.

Mark and Matthew tell us they “**took offense at him.**” They took offense *because* they knew his roots, *because* they couldn't imagine their town producing anything extraordinary.

But Luke is getting ready to do something a little different. He starts with the same story that hints that Jesus' ordinariness may have been offensive. *No prophet is accepted in his hometown.*

But then Jesus takes “offensive” to a whole new level. He reminds his neighbors of two times when Elijah and Elisha didn't reach out to their own Jewish people, but to outsiders. He dares to suggest that God might be at work outside the nation of Israel.

He steps all over the toes of those who would Make Israel Great Again.

This is still Jesus talking. **READ Luke 4: 25-30.**

<sup>25</sup>But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup>yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

<sup>27</sup>There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.'

<sup>28</sup>When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup>They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was

built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup>But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Here's where you have to know your Old Testament. These people in the synagogue thought the Lord was theirs and theirs alone. Israel was all that mattered to them. But Jesus used their own Scripture to show a larger plan, a more inclusive plan.

Jesus pointed out those occasions when Israel's mighty prophets Elijah and Elisha blessed not good Jews, but Gentiles. Outsiders. Unclean people. People who would *not* have been in the synagogue that day. People who would *not* have been in the synagogue any day.

This good news that Jesus was introducing to his neighbors was for outsiders as well as insiders. His gospel was for the poor and the captives and the blind and the oppressed that he read about from the scroll of Isaiah. His gospel was for the starving widows and arrogant soldiers *of other nations*.

*And his listeners did not take this message well.*

They grabbed Jesus, dragged him to the hilltop overlooking their town and tried to hurl him off. They were so enraged they tried to murder Jesus, their hometown boy.

Why? For suggesting that the Lord loved a poor Gentile widow and a leprous Gentile Army commander. For suggesting that his gospel might be rejected by insiders and accepted by outsiders.

It is certainly not too great a leap to see the connections for us.

We have leaders and their followers in this nation who are vocal about making America great again. It is a thinly disguised way of saying to people of color and to immigrants that you're not really one of us. We liked it better when you knew your place.

What are the things sure to turn Christians in the church murderous today?

To suggest that God loves drug addicts and ex-criminals and gang members?

To suggest that God loves Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus?

To suggest that God loves homosexuals and transgendered individuals?

It is easy for us to point to widows from Zarephath and leprous Syrian soldiers and say those Jews in the synagogue should have known that God loved them. Because some of us *are* Gentile widows. And we don't know any Syrian Army Commanders with leprosy.

Those people aren't our hot buttons.

But we have people who are our hot buttons.

Central American people fleeing the violence of their countries.

People of other faiths who can frighten us.

People of other sexual orientations.

The biggest question on the minds of people 2,000 years ago when Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue was, *How could God possibly love those people?*

The biggest question on the minds of Christians today is, *How could God possibly love those people?*

Many of us in this church know all too well how it feels to be an outsider. But we can turn around and jump at the chance to make someone else feel like an outsider, too.

When we're getting ready to do that, let's remember this story from the gospel writer Luke. Let's remember what Jesus preached on his first day in Nazareth, how he stepped on toes so blatantly that the people he grew up with tried to throw him off a cliff.

Let's remember that the whole point of Luke's gospel is that God loves everyone, not just those on whom we confer favor.

Amen.