

What's the Point?

Luke 4:14-30

Rev. Dan Schumacher

What do you hope happens after I set this Bible down?

Each Sunday, I lift this Bible, open its pages to the day's passage, read it aloud, then close it and I set my Bible here on the side of the pulpit, and I begin preaching. What do you hope happens?

Do you hope to learn something new? Do you hope to hear a funny story and get a good laugh? Be honest: do you just hope it will be short today?

I rarely preach for more than about 20 minutes. What do you hope will happen in the next 20 minutes?

I enrolled in Summer Greek for my first class at Princeton Seminary. We jokingly called it "baby Greek" – not because it was easy, but because you were up all night with it like a baby.

The class had about a hundred students, and in order to handle that many students, we were broken up into groups of about fifteen or so and assigned a Ph.D. student that they called a "preceptor" – which was just Princeton's fancy way of saying "teaching assistant." (By the way, that's why Princeton costs so much – you have to pay for words like "preceptor.")

One day about half way through the summer, my preceptor, Ryan, was scheduled to preach in chapel. I thought quite highly of Ryan. He was Greek wiz and had been incredibly encouraging and helpful to me as a new student. So I was excited to hear him preach.

That Wednesday, I sat my backpack outside the door of the chapel and found a spot on a pew next to a couple of my friends. The service began. The liturgy rolled on. Then it came time for Ryan to read the day's passage and to preach. He opened the enormous Chapel Bible to Psalm 103 – one of my absolute favorite psalms. He read:

"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits –

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live,

so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps. 103:1-5).

He closed the Bible and he prayed this simple prayer: "O God, what we desire is to hear a *fresh* word from You. Amen."

That's what I wanted. I wanted to hear a fresh and life-giving word. I was ready for that. I was sitting at the edge of my seat, thirsty for a fresh word from God.

Then Ryan preached the most dry, sterile, boring sermon I had ever heard in my life. It was all about Hebrew grammar and Hebrew syntax. He droned on and on in a sing-songy way that started to make my eyelids heavy. I wish I could tell you one good meaningful point that he made, but I can't... because I fell asleep. My friend had to nudge me awake when I started snoring. To be fair, I had been up all night with my new baby, "baby Greek."

What do *you* hope happens when I preach? Are you just hoping for a good nap? Don't worry. Someone will nudge you awake if you start snoring, too.

The Methodist minister, Will Willimon says, "Over the years, I have asked the question, "What do you hope for from a sermon?" Here are some of the responses I have received: *I like a sermon that helps me think about a biblical passage in a new and fresh way... I think a sermon ought to point out ways that I have gone wrong and to suggest ways I can get my life back on track... I want inspiration from the sermon, a feeling that I have been taken to a higher place, or have been given a special feeling as a result of the sermon... The best sermons are those that give me something that's easy to remember, something I can take home with me*" ("Jesus' Rejection at Nazareth," *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, Feb. 3, 2019).

Now, I'd be lying through my teeth if I were to tell you that I don't want those things, either, on the occasions when I get to hear someone else preach. On that day when Ryan preached at chapel, I would have traded his boring sermon for any of these other outcomes in an instant.

The problem is, none of those really line up with today's passage, and the story of Jesus preaching at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is often depicted as a preacher, but rarely do we actually get the content of his sermons. Today is one of the few exceptions. What do you think Jesus hoped to accomplish with this sermon?

Imagine the scene, if you can. Jesus is back in his childhood synagogue on the Sabbath day. These are the folks who have known him his entire life. They were the ones who bounced him on their knees. They were there when his voice started to crack and his feet got too big too fast. For crying out loud, these were the people who attended his circumcision. There was nothing about Jesus that they did not know.

In that day a time, there was only one Jewish Temple and it was in Jerusalem. But synagogues were allowed to pop up anywhere where there were 10 or more Jewish men. The synagogue worship services were really rather informal, consisting primarily of prayers, reading of Scripture, comments, and alms for the poor. All adult

males were permitted to read scripture and make comments. On this day, it would seem that it was Jesus' turn.

They hand him the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolls it to Isaiah 61 and reads, "The spirit of the LORD is upon me, he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free... to preach the year of God's favor." And then, he looks up from the scroll and says to the hometown crowd, "Today, these words have been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's a bold statement, but an encouraging one. Israelites of all stripes had been waiting for God's deliverance; had been waiting for the Messiah. For too long the Jewish people had been under the heel of others — Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, now Rome. They'd had their share of troubles and oppression and captivity. So this really was good news.

Excitement rippled through the congregation. God was at last making good on God's promises. All would finally be set right.

Then the preacher, Jesus, rolled up the scroll and, as was the custom, he sat down to preach. That was when the trouble started.

Jesus looks around the room at his hometown crowd — his elementary school teachers over here, his neighbors over there, his orthodontist, his cousins — where else but on the back row, his butcher, his brothers and sisters — and he starts his sermon by saying, "No prophet is accepted in his hometown."

He goes on: "Do you remember when God showed up through the hands of those prophets of old? Remember when in the days of Elijah God shut up the heavens for three and half years — no rain, no crops, famine everywhere? Remember that? There were Jewish widows starving on every farm and street corner in Israel, but who did God send Elijah to? Not to a Jewish widow, but the Gentile one. The pagan one. The widow from Zarephath."

The hometown crowd suddenly grew real quiet. Arms started crossing. Smiles started being replaced with puzzling looks. Where was this going?

But Jesus wasn't done. "There were also lots of people suffering from illness, from leprosy, in the days of Elisha, but God's prophet healed none of them. Only one was healed: Namaan, a military officer for the Syrian army, an officer in the *enemy's* army."

Well, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. The congregation was filled with rage. How dare he suggest that God loved other nations more than them! How dare he say that God even loved their enemies!

You can almost see the pitchforks and torches as they rose up and ran him out of town. They led Jesus to the edge of a cliff — his own people... his neighbors and

friends... his family. They led him to the edge of a cliff and planned to hurl him off. It wasn't a "stoning" in the traditional sense. But there's more than one way to skin a cat. Rather than throw stones at him until he was killed, they'd hurl him at a stone for his blasphemy.

According to Luke this was Jesus' first sermon, and they'd kill him for it.

Now, I have preached some difficult sermons in my life — and I have had some negative reactions to my words, but in all my sermons over the years no one has ever threatened to murder me. Why were they so outraged at his words?

We have to understand that since the days of Abraham, the Israelites had understood themselves as God's people... elected... set apart... special and unique in God's eyes... beloved above everyone else. God was their God, and they were God's people. You see? He was *their* God. He didn't belong to the widows of Zarephath or soldiers in the Syrian army. God was *their* God.

So when they came to worship, what do you think they hoped would happen in a sermon?

They probably wanted to be reminded that they were numbered among the chosen. They wanted to be reminded that God was on their side, that God pledged allegiance to them and them alone. What were all those stories of Moses and Sampson and David about if not the story of God choosing them and them alone.

And if we're honest, isn't that what we want, too? To be God's favorites? To have God hate all the people we hate and love all the people we love? To have God pledge allegiance to us and us alone?

But that's not what Jesus preached. In his sermon, he didn't say, "Blessed are you, O Israel, chosen from among the nations; set apart and adored." He did not reenforce what they wanted to hear or what they already believed.

Instead, he said, "If you think God shares all the same enemies with you, then your 'god' is too small."

He could say it to us, too, couldn't he? Who is it that you don't think ought to be allowed membership in this church? Who is that you think is undeserving of God's love and acceptance?

The late, German theologian and Lutheran pastor, Martin Neimöller said it like this: "It took me a long time to realize that not only did God not hate my enemies, he didn't even hate his enemies."

God is always bigger than our expectations. God will show mercy on those whom God will show mercy. God will love whomever God chooses to love. And the good news of God's coming was never for Israel alone or for America alone or for Baptists alone or for Republicans alone or for Democrats alone or for capitalists alone or for communists alone. Do you get the point: God is *always* bigger.

And as I see it, the purpose of a sermon is not simply to teach you something new or give you a good joke or to make you feel something special. The purpose of a sermon is *to bring you closer to the true and living God.*

And the truth is that sometimes closeness with God feels good, like being on a spiritual mountain top. But sometimes being brought close to God, doesn't feel so good — especially when being brought close to God shows us just how far short we have fallen from God's will for us.

But, friends, what are really here for if not to be brought into the presence of God? If not to be pulled closer into communion with the true and living God? What do we really hope a sermon will do if not that?

A Rabbi friend of Will Willimon says this: "Judaism is a rather simple religion that is based on two profound articles of faith: The first: there is only one God. The second: you are not it."

Is that maybe what Jesus' hometown congregation experienced from his sermon?

They arrived at worship that morning with their conceptions of God firmly in place. Then the preacher used nothing but scripture to correct, expand, critique, grow their idea of who God is and who God cares about.

Every person in the synagogue in Nazareth that day began worship by reciting the *shema*: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is one."

Jesus, good Jew that he was, reminded the faithful that it's not like the Syrians have their God, and we have our patron God who runs errands just for us. There is only one God, and our God is determined to be their God, too. God is not our tamed pet. God is God. We are not.

And the only way we ever seem to get that message is when we're brought close enough to the living God to see how far short we fall.

So, what do you hope for in this 20 minutes each week?

To simply learn something new? To hear a few stories and get a laugh or two? To take a good nap?

Or to be transformed by the God who is always more than we know?

When asked what he thought about children's sermons, the Rev. James Cleland like to reply with this story:

A pastor had a children's sermon. He called all the children down front and asked them, "Boys and girls, what eats nuts, lives in a tree, and has a bushy tail?"

One little boy shouted out, "God???"

The congregation erupted with laughter. The children's sermon was ruined. There was nothing to do but have a closing prayer and send the kids back to their parents.

After the service, as the little boy was leaving the church, the pastor pulled him aside and said, "Look kid. Why did you answer 'God' when I asked that question about squirrels?"

And without missing a beat, the little boy looked up at the pastor and said, "You're a preacher. Right? This is church. Right? You're supposed to be talking about God, not squirrels."

So, why would we want anything less?

Amen.