

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 4:14-30

6 February 2022

Hearing and Seeing

Opening Greeting & Prayer

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning to all of you who join us online.

Welcome to any and all guests here with us this morning.

Let us pray: God of hope and life, your grace, mercy, and blessing are for everyone. Give us ears to hear and eyes to see those whom you have called us to serve and reach out to in the spirit of Jesus. Fill our lives with your generosity and embrace as we invite others to follow in the way of Jesus. Amen.

Message:

You may or may not remember that this morning's message is really part 2 of a message that I offered you all 2 weeks ago. We looked at the first half of our passage, verses 14-21, on that Sunday. My title was *Reading and Proclaiming*, using Jesus's example of reading aloud the verses from Isaiah 61 and then proclaiming to his audience in the synagogue in Nazareth that he is the one who is referenced in the reading. He is the Messiah, called by God and anointed by the Holy Spirit to bring good news to all people. All that Israel had been waiting for since the return from exile in Babylon so many years ago is finally here, at least according to Jesus. His very own people, those who had felt like and sometimes were captives to the Roman Empire, those who were poor and marginalized, scraping by amidst the crushing oppression of local imposter

leaders, have longed for his coming. Jesus is calling for the new exodus that was promised, the restoration of the people of God that his relative John had already started in the wilderness.

Through Jesus, release from the sins of the nation and freedom for the oppressed is at hand, here and now. When Jesus sits down having finished his sermon, everyone in the synagogue is focused on him, anticipating what might be next.

The chatter starts from a low murmur and begins to build as the people wonder what all Jesus could mean by these words of hope, of victory, of freedom. Isn't he Joseph's son? Haven't we watched him grow up, working among the other laborers in the local building projects at Sepphoris? What could Jesus mean by these words of grace? They had heard about all that had happened in Cana and Capernaum and other villages, but what about them? Who is Jesus going to heal first? Will Jesus take a band of young men to Sepphoris or maybe to Herod's palace to raid the grain storehouses or free his relative John in prison? It's almost like Jesus can hear or read their thoughts before they even speak, so he responds.

Jesus' words in verse 23 reveal the audience's true desires: "doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, heal yourself,' do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." Even at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, the crowds will taunt him, unable to see how what he is doing among them is what God had promised and envisioned for the world all along. These words in Nazareth are similar to the taunts that Jesus will hear at the end of his ministry on the cross outside Jerusalem, "He saved others; let him save himself." We might hear similar taunts and mockery in our own time when people struggle to believe that God's kingdom is here, right now, breaking through our present circumstances with true peace and joy, with healing and restoration. We might hear similar phrases like "Get your own house in

order before you go out to others,” or “how could any god be present in the midst of such suffering and heart-ache.” Or maybe, “If God is here, God’s not doing a whole lot.”

If you remember from my sermon two weeks ago, you might be thinking as the audience in Nazareth probably was, about the next line in Isaiah 61 that Jesus did not read. Jesus has been baptized into this renewed people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and tested by the accuser in the wilderness in preparation for proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor, the year of Jubilee, the time long-anticipated by his ethnic neighbors and friends. The problem is that Jesus stopped short of what his audience had long-thought was God’s plan, what they had been sitting at the edge of their seats waiting to hear, which was that Jesus was coming to proclaim the day of vengeance of God Almighty. In several other writings from this time period, we read of the longing of the nation of Israel for their covenant-god to liberate them from their foreign oppressors by raining down wrath and destruction on their enemies, but Jesus has no sense of that kind of liberation. The grace, the freedom, the hope, the anticipation of redemption that has been promised them through the ancient prophets is not only for them at the expense of their enemies, but for them and their enemies, for all people. This is why the audience is astounded, even amazed at the gracious nature of Jesus’s words. The expectation of military victory over their perceived enemies is twisting their vision of who the true Messiah is. They hear Jesus words, but they struggle to see what Jesus is attempting to draw out for them.

In some sense, the ears of his audience are plugged. Their eyes are clouded as Jesus continues to explain in verses 25-27. Remember when the Lord refrained from sending rain on the land in the time of Elijah. In 1 Kings 17, Elijah did not go to other widows in Israel but instead found refuge with a Sidonian woman at Zarephath. We do not hear all of this story’s context in Luke, which makes it more difficult to understand Jesus’s intention. We must

remember that Elijah is on the run from King Ahab, a ruthless and corrupt leader of the northern kingdom, who defied any of Elijah's pleas for a return to worshipping the Lord and a repentance from worshipping idols. King Ahab marries Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the Sidonians, most likely as a diplomatic strategy, but he goes so far as to not only worship the storm-god Baal in the Sidonian capital with his wife's family, but Ahab builds an altar to Baal in the capital of the northern kingdom, Samaria. After God tells Ahab through Elijah that no rain will fall, Elijah goes to Zarephath, a city of Sidon and the enemy god of the Lord to care for a widow and her family on the brink of starvation from the famine that God has brought on the land. This is to show that the true god, the one in charge, the god who sustains in the midst of suffering, is not Baal, the supposed god of Sidon, but YHWH, the Lord, the god who has carried Israel even as a divided nation. God's sustaining presence, even in this story from ancient Israel, is not only meant for the covenant people but is shared with everyone, especially those on the margins.

Then in Jesus' second allusion to the story in 2 Kings 5, he tells of Elijah's successor, Elisha. Elisha heals one of the commanders of the armies of Aram, a neighboring nation. His name is Naaman; He has a skin disease of some kind and is probably one of many in that time both inside and outside the northern kingdom. Aram is often an enemy to the northern kingdom, so what can it mean that the covenant-god of Israel offers the grace of healing even to the commander of enemy armies? After his healing, Naaman becomes a believer in the God of Israel and most likely an influence in any further military campaigns against the northern kingdom by Aram. The grace that God offers us and all people changes not only us but the world around us, bring seeds of peace and cooperation to the relationships between nations and people groups.

When Jesus finishes speaking, we can sense the atmosphere in the synagogue has shifted drastically, from amazement and wonder in verse 22 to rage in verse 28. I can hear the first shout

from one in the audience, “Who are you to say all of this, son of Joseph?” “How would you know any better than the rest of us, or have your miracles gone to your head?” Or for the ones who remember Jesus’s conception and birth, some might have said, “You were born among animals in Bethlehem, conceived before your parents were even married. How would you have any idea what God almighty is going to do?” After the first insults are thrown at Jesus, the shouting comes down like an avalanche as the audience, now a mob, surrounds Jesus in their fury. Some of the men grab him by the arms and begin walking him to the edge of town, leading the mob to the cliff as they all continue to shout at Jesus. This place might have been the local trash heap where dead animals and waste were thrown to keep all of it distant from the people. Somehow Jesus gets loose from his captors and passes through the midst of the crowd on his way to anywhere but home, an affirmation of the truth that he spoke initially in the synagogue.

In this moment, I wonder if Jesus had come, expecting such a response, or if he had been truly surprised and heart-broken by the very people that he had grown up knowing and caring for. The truth of that experience in Nazareth must be haunting his walk to Capernaum: “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” The intentions of the covenant fall on deaf ears and blind eyes among Jesus’s neighbors and friends. Can’t they see it? Can’t they hear the winds of the Spirit moving? The steadfast love of God has come in Jesus to be shared with everyone, even Israel’s enemies and oppressors, which we will see throughout the rest of Jesus’s ministry. Exactly at those moments when we would expect someone to be excluded because they are not thought to be a part of the chosen people, Jesus will astound and amaze us by including them in the great renewal and redemption that has come: a Roman soldier or centurion, a Samaritan woman, a leper, a demon-possessed person, a corrupt and cheating tax collector, an unclean person, and even a child. It is exactly at the moment of judgment when we want to make certain

of who is and is not loved by God that Jesus walks into the situation and destroys all of our pretense and prejudice.

Lest we judge the people of Nazareth too harshly, we must look at our own longings for restoration and renewal or our attempts to claim God's promises and love for ourselves, while selectively extending them to those whom we deem worthy or acceptable. How often have we envied the perceived blessing of others around us by God and longed for God to move in our situation as the people of Nazareth expect of Jesus? Can we bear to hear and see today the radical nature of God's grace? Can we begin to lean into the leading of the Holy Spirit as we reach out in hope to our enemies and friends, inviting them into the same grace that is transforming and holding us? Can we broaden our horizons, see beyond our resentment and prejudice, listen for the voice and leading of the Holy Spirit among those whom we have written off or ignored? Or maybe, where we are right now is in the mob, attempting to push Jesus off of the edge of the cliff because we struggle to hear and see the kingdom come among us, let alone welcome it.

In an era of intense polarization, disagreement, and demonization, can we begin to see the grace of God working in those who seem furthest from our point of view? I think especially this week of the news report that President Biden had a special military unit attack the home and kill the leader of ISIS, a supposedly necessary casualty among many in an on-going conflict with an organization that has no allegiance to a particular nation-state. What does the creative peacemaking of the stories of Elijah and Elisha inspire in us in moments like these when we are almost always told that the best solution to our struggle with our enemies is violence through guns, bombs, drones, and soldiers? If Jesus has come to bring the good news of liberation, freedom, hope, peace, and vision to all people, even those we consider below such dignity and

grace, how can we be the hands and feet of Jesus? Even today, we seek to hear and see the kingdom come in us, among us, and through us as we carry on the mission of our Lord Jesus.

Closing Prayer: Let us pray: faithful God, open our eyes and ears to your creative calling as we live into your kingdom way. Inspire grace and generosity in our hearts that we would be filled with your welcome and hospitality. Help us to love even our enemies. In Jesus' name. Amen.