

**The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19
<i>Response</i>	I will sing of your salvation.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 71:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 15-17
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Lord sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 4:21-30

The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday for Ordinary Time for Year C picks up where we left off with Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth in the synagogue, and it tells us the aftermath of his declaration that the scriptures had been fulfilled in the hearing of the people of Nazareth. So we're going to read the gospel for today, we're going to see how Jesus' first homily went, and then we'll go back to the Old Testament and make some connections. In Luke 4:21 and following, this is what it says:

And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.' " And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was

built, that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them he went away.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so what do we make of the aftermath of Jesus' first homily, the response to his homily? Well first, notice the initial response is positive. Everybody spoke well of him and they wondered at the gracious words that came out of his mouth. So first they're kind of awestruck, they're a little curious about what he's just said, about the scripture being fulfilled in their hearing, and they also reflect the familiarity of Jesus. "Hey, isn't this Joseph's boy?" But notice, they don't react negatively yet. I bring this up because in some of the film versions of this episode (like Zeffirelli's famous "Jesus of Nazareth" from the 1970's), when Jesus says the scriptures have been fulfilled, the synagogue immediately reacts negatively — which doesn't make a lot of sense because everyone's waiting for the scriptures to be fulfilled. Why would they have a negative reaction to the mere declaration that the scripture has been fulfilled? The coming of the Messiah would be a source of joy. There would be some confusion, maybe a little anxiety, wondering what it'll be like, but they're not going to react negatively and try to kill him just because he said the scriptures were fulfilled. So in order to understand the negative reaction, you have to keep reading in Luke, and be very specific about what happens. After they respond positively, and then they say, "Hey, isn't this Joseph's boy?" Which by the way, if you're a reader of Luke and you've read the annunciation, you know that actually he's not Joseph's boy, he's the Father's son, and Joseph is his foster father (in the sense that he was conceived virginally, by the Blessed Virgin Mary).

In any case, Jesus responds to their positive initial reception by saying two things. "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.'" Now, this is really interesting because only in Luke is this saying of Jesus preserved. Why is it interesting? Well because as I mentioned in the introductory video to the Gospel of Luke, Luke is identified by Paul as having been a beloved physician, as having been a doctor. So it's kind of neat that the one text in the gospels that explicitly calls Jesus a doctor is preserved in the gospel that's attributed to Luke, the doctor. Is it coincidence? I don't think so. I think Luke is probably attracted to that episode and that saying because he himself is a physician.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

And in this case, Jesus prefigures the cross. He's kind of pointing forward through a riddle to the fact that on his Passion they're going to say, "Well if you're the Son of God, save yourself." And the Greek word for save, *sozo*, is actually ambiguous. It can mean "save" or it can mean "heal". But in this verse, Jesus actually uses the word *therapeuson*, heal yourself. They're positive and he responds with this weird riddle, you'll tell me "Doctor, heal yourself" and "do here what you also did in Capernaum." In other words, they're going to demand a sign before they believe. So he's kind of undercutting their initial response by saying, "You're not actually going to believe in me."

And what's the second saying? Well the second one's more famous because it's in more than one gospel, which is, "a prophet is not acceptable in his hometown" or "in his own country." So here he just flat out says, "You [unlike Capernaum] are going to reject me. You're not going to accept me, precisely because to you, I'm just Joseph's boy." You know the old saying, "familiarity breeds contempt"? Well it certainly breeds contempt for prophets and messiahs. It's just too hard to get over the scandal of being familiar with the person, to believe that God has some greater purpose in mind for them — in this case, to fulfill the scriptures as the messiah. Now, none of that would have necessarily generated a "mob response" to Jesus' words. I don't think either of those riddles is explicit enough to make the crowd angry. What really makes the crowd angry is when Jesus starts talking about the Old Testament, and he says "there were many widows at the time of Eli'jah, but Eli'jah didn't go to them." He didn't go to the Israelite widows, he went to this pagan widow in the land of Zar'ephath in Sidon. And he says "and there were many lepers in Israel at the time of Eli'sha," but he didn't go to any of them, he went to a pagan leper, Naaman the Syrian.

Now I don't know about you, but whenever I see this passage...if I was sitting in the synagogue and he quoted this, I'd just be like, "Oh. That's interesting. Na'aman... widow of Zar'ephath... okay." I would not rise up and want to throw him off of a hill for saying that. So if you don't understand the crowd's vehement response to Jesus, it's obvious that you don't get the allusion to those Old Testament texts that he's quoting there. So it's really important for us to actually go back to those Old Testament passages and look at them in context. Now, we don't have time to do that in a lot of detail here, but I would refer you to read two key passages:

First, the story of Eli'jah (who's the older prophet) and the widow of Zar'ephath is in the book of Kings, so 1 Kings 17. What it describes is this widow who's running out of food. She's about to die, basically, from starvation because there's been a famine in the land of Israel for 3 years. And guess who caused the famine? Eli'jah. Well, actually, he didn't cause it, but he had control, he had power over it because the sins of the people have led God to withdraw his grace and there was a famine. And Eli'jah is going to be the one who, through his prayer, has the power to bring that famine to an end.

So, what happens is, in that context, what Jesus is saying is the Israelites were so wicked at the time of Eli'jah that he didn't bring the blessing of relief from the famine to any of them, or any of their widows. He brought it to a Gentile widow, who was living in the land of Sidon. Tyre and Sidon, they're up in the North Western part (northwest of the Holy Land) of the tribal territories of Israel. That was the land of Pagans. It was a land of Gentiles. So what Jesus is saying is, "There were lots of wicked Israelites at the time of Eli'jah." They were so wicked, he brought God's blessing to a pagan widow. Then, to add insult to injury, Jesus gives a 2<sup>nd</sup> example of a time when the Israelites were so wicked that a prophet didn't bring blessing to them but brought it to a pagan. Here he uses the example of Eli'sha, who was Eli'jah's successor. In 2 Kings 5 there's a story of Na'aman, he was a general in the Assyrian army but he was also a leper, and he comes to the land of Israel to seek healing from a prophet of the true God, the God of Israel. And so Eli'sha tells him to go wash in the Jordan River seven times. And when he does, his flesh is healed and he comes out with "the skin of a baby." He's completely healed of his leprosy.

So what's the common link between both of those stories? The common link is that at the time of both Eli'jah and Eli'sha, the tribes of Israel were so wicked that the prophet brought the blessing to a Gentile instead of to Israel. Eli'jah brought the blessing to a Gentile widow, Eli'sha brought the blessing to a Gentile general, an officer in the Gentile army of Syria. So what's the upshot of Jesus' quotation of those two passages? It's that "You, people of Nazareth, are like the wicked Israelites at the time of Eli'jah and Eli'sha. You are going to reject me as a prophet and the blessing and the good news is going to come from me and it's going to end up going to pagans. It's going to go out to the Gentiles." And that's what makes them mad. That's what makes them furious. It would be as if (I'm trying to think of a—

there's not really a good contemporary analogy)...I can imagine a situation where (in a contemporary American context), if I said to a large group of people, "You're no better than the slave owners at the time of the Civil War" – it would be represented as a kind of moral low point in the history of our country. Or you are no better than the slave traders that lead up to the Civil War; that would be an accusation of a moral depravity that was widely known and which people all assume, "Oh, we're all better than they were at that point in history. Their sins were really bad, we're better." So Jesus makes the same kind of analogy and he rouses the ire of the people of his hometown. They probably are expecting him to come into town as a local boy to praise them ("he's our pride and joy") and instead he turns it on them and compares them to one of the most wicked generations in the history of Israel. I mean this was when Queen Jezebel was queen for goodness sake. She is just the epitome of wickedness and evil, and that's who he compares his fellow Nazarites to. So, what happens? "When they heard this," Luke said, "all in the synagogue were filled with wrath." They are really angry. They rose up, put him out of the city, led him to the brow of the hill, and they were going to cast him headlong. But, he passes through the midst of them. It's not his time yet to die.

Okay, so I hope that helps put the response of the members of the synagogue in Nazareth to Jesus' homily in context. Over the years I have liked to tease my seminarians who are preparing for ordination and say, "Look, just pray that your first homily goes more like St. Peter's first homily, where he converted 3,000 people, than Jesus' first homily, where they tried to kill him." So if at the end of your homily you aren't mobbed, and they don't try to throw you off a hill, you're doing okay. You're doing alright, because that was the initial response to Jesus' first sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth.

Alright, so with that in mind, what about the Old Testament reading for today? In this case, the text is taken from the book of Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19, and it's story, or the account of God's call of Jeremiah, and also of God's prediction, his oracle, that Jeremiah is going to be opposed. That he is going to be rejected by his own people, the people of Jerusalem. And so this is what it says:

Now the word of the Lord came to me [Jeremiah] saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then it skips down to verse 17, speaking to Jeremiah:

But you, gird up your loins; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.

Alright, if you know anything about the life of the prophet Jeremiah, you know that it was a drag. Jeremiah is beat up, rejected, thrown down a well, persecuted, accused, eventually — actually according to Jewish tradition actually — things get so bad for him that he has to leave the Holy Land. He flees to Egypt, and there some Jews who were living in Egypt — according to the tradition — end up stoning him to death. His prophetic career is just one long valley of tears. It's just one long life of sorrow. And what God's telling him in the book of Jeremiah is, "that's what I called you to." That's what I've consecrated you for. I have appointed you to be the prophet to a people who are not going to listen." God knows they're not going to respond to Jeremiah, he knows that they're not going to repent, but he still has the task to preach the truth to them and to proclaim the message of repentance or face the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, which is of course exactly what happened. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (around 587), the prophet Jeremiah is proclaiming over and over again, "If you don't repent, Babylon is going to come and destroy the temple." The Jerusalem priests and leaders did not repent, they rejected Jeremiah and they tried to kill Jeremiah, and when he wrote a book of prophecy they burned it. This guy faced constant opposition and eventually Jerusalem was in fact destroyed and the temple was, in fact, burned to the ground.

The juxtaposition of this passage with the gospel of Luke shows us a category which I think sometimes, nowadays, many Christians don't think about, but which is really important, which is that Jesus isn't just a new Adam, or a new Moses, or a new David; he's also very much a new Jeremiah. He's a prophet who's going to come to a city of Jerusalem, which is going to reject him, who's leaders are going to reject him, who's leaders are going to put him to death, and eventually who's city will be destroyed. And you can see this not from Luke but from the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus asks the Apostles, "Who do men say that I am?" One of the first things they say is, "Some say Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Why would they say such a thing? Well because Jesus...one of his most famous discourses is the Olivet Discourse, one of the longest speeches in the Gospel of Mark, is all

about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. And the prophet of the temple's destruction in the Old Testament is Jeremiah.

The parallels here between the rejection of Jeremiah and the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth are both important and ominous. The shadow of the cross, so to speak, is already being cast over Jesus' public ministry from the very beginning. He's going to set his face toward a Jerusalem that's going to reject him, hand him over to the Gentiles, and ultimately crucify him.

So, how do we respond to that? How do we respond today when there's so much persecution of so many Christians all around the world, especially in Africa and in the east? Well, the Psalm for today is meant to give us hope. Psalm 71, the Responsorial Psalm, is about the fact that God is our rock and God is our refuge. There are a lot of Psalms in the book of Psalms, which are psalms of lamentation, others are psalms of hope in the midst of persecution, and Psalm 71 is one of those. Psalm 71:1 and following says this:

In thee, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame!

And then it says in verse 3:

Be thou to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for thou art my rock and my fortress

And then in verse 6:

Upon thee I have leaned from my birth; thou art he who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of thee.

So what the Psalmist is describing here is, he's basically saying, "No matter what happens in my life, God is my rock, God is my refuge. I've leaned on you from the moment of my birth. Every breath that I have is a gift from you. And therefore, no matter what happens in my life, no matter what persecution I might face, no matter what opposition I might encounter, I'm going to lean on God. I'm going to put my trust not in my own strength, or in my own power, but in the strength and the power of my God who has the might and the power to save. He's the only one who can save me, so I'm going to trust in him." So that becomes a kind of call for hope in the midst of suffering and persecution that bridges the gap between Jeremiah, the prophet, and the suffering he faced, and Jesus, the new Jeremiah, who's going to face the cross as well in the Gospel of Luke.

So in closing then I'd like to end with a little quote (as always I love to do) from the living tradition. St. Ambrose of Milan, who was a bishop in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, who basically played a key role in the conversion of St. Augustine. If we wouldn't have had St. Ambrose, we wouldn't have gotten Augustine. Augustine learned from Ambrose, Ambrose was his mentor, and Ambrose is significant because he was the first Church Father to compose a complete commentary on the Gospel of Luke. Origen, earlier, did a series of homilies on Luke, and they're valuable, but Ambrose gives us a kind of verse-by-verse commentary on the Gospel of Luke. Don't go looking for it though in English; it's out-of-print, very expensive, very hard to find. I have a copy of it, but you'll never be able to get one. Anyway, Ambrose in Milan in his commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke says this about the mysterious verse, that last verse of Jesus passing through the midst of them. I don't know if you wondered about that until now. What does that mean, "he passed through their midst?" This is what Ambrose said:

Understand that [Jesus] was not forced to suffer the passion of his body. He was not taken by the Jews but given by himself. Indeed, he is taken when he wants to be. He glides away when he wants to. He is hung when he wants to be. He is not held when he does not wish it. Here he goes up to the summit of the hill to be thrown down. But, behold, the minds of the furious men were suddenly changed or confused. He descended through their midst, for the hour of his passion had not yet come.<sup>2</sup>

I think that's a good insight on Ambrose's point. Some scholars will point out the fact that in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "Nobody takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord." And we'll point to that a distinctively Johannine theme. But the reality is the same thing's true in Luke. The crowd brings him up to the top of the hill and he goes to the top of the hill, and it appears as if they're going to be able put him to death right there by throwing him headlong down the hill. But then, mysteriously, maybe even miraculously, he simply "passes through their midst" because his hour has not yet come. And as we'll see, in weeks to come, he's going to have a long public ministry that has to be carried out before the hour of the cross finally comes.

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<sup>2</sup> Ambrose, *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, 4.56; trans. in A. Just, p. 83