

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 27, 2019
Luke 4:16-30
“Not Another Service”

Another week, another church service. “Do I have to go?” “What difference does it make anyway?” “It’s the same thing every Sunday.” And the wife says to her husband, “You have to go.” “Why?” “Because you’re the pastor.”

Surprised? Oh yes, even pastors feel that way sometimes. Maybe you have felt like that or even said those words. That’s the way our sinful nature works. It’s why we sometimes find that we have to drag ourselves to church on Sunday morning. It’s why many people find that it is so much easier to do something, anything, other than getting up, getting ready, and going to church on Sunday mornings. There are so many important things to do on Sunday’s, right? Our sinful nature is the reason why we become so dissatisfied with Jesus, why we find it so hard to spend time with Him in worship or daily devotion. You know from your own experience how hard it is to fight your sinful nature which wants nothing to do with Jesus. You also know from God’s Word that you cannot trust your old sinful nature.

The old man in us knows exactly what is good for it – to keep us out of God’s Word and away from Jesus. That is what is good for the old sinful nature, but it is incredibly bad for the new man created by Christ Jesus. That’s why this whole church thing can be such a struggle. You’re always wrestling against yourself to even get here. The Divine Service should be such a joy because we know that our Savior Jesus who died for us meets us right here and yet it more often seems like so much drudgery.

Being where God promises to meet us might not be natural to us, but it is for our Lord. Luke tells us that Jesus “came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day” (Luke 4:16) How about that? Even Jesus, who is the Word, goes to church to hear the Word! As a child He studied and learned the Scriptures. Now as an adult, He shows that He is still devoted to it. He attends services faithfully. His custom, His habit, is to love the Word. Wouldn’t that be something? What would it be like to come to church not as a duty or burden, not out of a sense of obligation, not as a “have to” nor simply “It’s what we do,” nor as a matter of we need it (although we certainly do need the grace and forgiveness that are delivered here) – but what would it be like to come here because we love to be here? That is life for Jesus. He’s the man who lives “not by bread alone” (Luke 4:4) but “by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh” (Deuteronomy 8:3). He’s the one described by the first Psalm: “Blessed is the man – Jesus – “His delight is in the Law of Yahweh, and on His Law He meditates day and night. He is like a tree planed by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its lead does not wither” (Psalm 1:1-3). It was normal and natural for Jesus to be in church because He held God’s Word sacred and He gladly came to hear and learn it.

But this Sabbath was different. This time Jesus didn't come to the synagogue in Nazareth as the son of Joseph. He'd been that. He'd been the obedient son of Joseph and Mary for thirty years. No today He wasn't in the synagogue as a hearer of the Word. Today He comes to the synagogue as a teacher of the Word, a rabbi, a guest preacher come to His home church. He comes as a Son of the Father who is in heaven. "And He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of Yahweh 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 recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:16-19).

The downhome folks in Nazareth had never seen this side of Jesus. They had never heard Him speak like this before. So whether they came to church that day out of habit or a sense of obligation, even if they came out of a genuine love for the Word of God, all of them got more than they expected. This wasn't just another old service going through the motions and then going home. "And He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him" (Luke 4:20). That's a great description, isn't it? All eyes in the church are fixed on Jesus. No dozing in the pew after a late night that day. No daydreaming about next Sunday's Super Bowl. No furtive glances at a phone or a watch in the synagogue. Wouldn't it be great if those words could describe us today? "Jesus came and the eyes of all were fixed on Him!"

Then it was time for the sermon. It wasn't a lecture on theology. There were no ten steps to a better you. There was no call to rally together for some social issue. In a simple and profound way, Jesus applied God's Word to the people right there: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). "What Isaiah wrote" Jesus announces, "is all about Me." It's as if the words of the prophet walked right off the page and stood in front of them – like one of those movies where the characters of the book come to life as you read. Except this was no fairy tale or story. This was real – a real scroll, a real Jesus, a real Word from the real lips of the real God in flesh spoken into the real ears of His people. He fills out the Word in four dimensions, in time and space.

Jesus is the Word of God in human flesh – the Word that is living and active, present in this place for you. The Spirit of the Lord is upon Him. He's the Anointed One, the Christ. That's why He went to the synagogue on that Sabbath day, and they couldn't believe their ears! "All spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth. And they said, 'This is Joseph's son, isn't He?'" (Luke 4:22) No, not really. Truly He is God's Son conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

That's why He comes to church so faithfully even today: to deliver the Good News of salvation to you poor and needy sinners, to proclaim liberty to you debtors to sin, to give sight to you blinded by your sinful nature and desires, to set you free who are slaves to sin, to let you know that the marvelous year of Jubilee has come. All is forgiven. All is reset. It happens in your hearing – literally, in your ears. That's how Jesus makes Himself and His forgiveness known to

you. It's as St Paul describe sit: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). So today in your hearing, this Scripture is fulfilled again: Jesus, the Anointed One, comes with the Lord's favor for you.

That's really the point of every Sunday. Flesh and blood Jesus Christ, true God and also true man, steps into our midst and He never grows tired of doing this! He loves to fulfill His Word over and over again to be the Word for poor, needy sinners like you and me. So Sunday isn't really about you or even what you are doing here, though it's good for you to be here. The real deal, the important thing, is that He is here. He is here for the depressed and despairing. He is here for the sinner and the sinned against. He is here for the oppressed, victimized, abused, taken advantage of, and suffering. He is the answer to our prayer today: "Stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us."

Not all who hear believe, rather like the people in Jesus' hometown. What do they want with Jesus? Apparently not the Good News He proclaims, the liberty He brings, the sight He gives, nor the freedom He promises. They want Jesus on their own terms. They don't want Him as He comes, gracious and inviting, forgiving to all, Jews and Gentiles alike. They decided it would be better if He were dead. So they throw Him out of their synagogue and march Him to the edge of a precipice. They want the Anointed One crushed, bruised, wounded, stricken, smitten and afflicted. They want to do it. That hill wasn't Calvary though. It wasn't His time to be crushed for their iniquities. He would be of course. He came to suffer for our sin, for the way that we have groaned about hearing His Word again, for our indifference to His Word and will for our lives, for the many times we have allowed ourselves to be distracted or enticed away from it. And instead of taking His Word away and leaving us without hope or help, He continually comes. He comes and stretches forth His hand of majesty offering the favor of the Lord to us. He doesn't have to be here. He doesn't have to offer of His grace. He is under no obligation to forgive us again for our sins. He doesn't need anything from us, our sins, our prayers, our offerings contribute nothing to Him and yet He comes week after week, service after service, forgiving, loving, showing mercy to us and to all.

The joy of life in the Church is that it's never just another service. Every week is a little Christmas. Every Sunday a new Epiphany. Jesus Himself is the rabbi, the teacher whose Word proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. And He is more than that. He is God Himself right here with us in our midst visiting us with His mercy and grace. That's why we want to be here even on those days when we cannot. Our spirits say with the psalmist: "How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Yahweh of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of Yahweh" (Psalm 84:1-2).

So we're not characterized only by our old sinful nature. You can tell that old Adam to get lost, stop harassing you, because Jesus your Lord, your Savior, your brother, your friend is here to meet you and you desire to meet Him too. It is the Spirit of the Lord who dwells in us that drags us out of bed and gets us into the pew so that we can hear His Word and receive His gifts again in order that His Word can be fulfilled in our hearing with the result that forgiveness and eternal life can fill us. More than that He is the one who leads us to rejoice in this Word and to respond, "When will He be back so that we can meet together again?"

That's just the way Jesus is – He always proclaims His Word. He is always present in that Word. He is always flesh and blood. He is always crucified and resurrected for you. He is always forgiving and gracious, eager to announce to you the wondrous Good News that you are indeed forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.