

Scripture passage, Luke 4:16-31

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I was in conversation with a Muslim imam many years ago, we were talking about our religious differences—not in any argumentative way, certainly-- in a friendly way. The Imam said to me, “We Muslims have only ONE Koran, you Christians have MANY Bibles.” I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what he said. By that I think he meant that we Christians have different translations of the Bible and that it’s a collection from many different sources and from different time periods—across several millennium. On the other hand there really are only five almost-complete Korans written in Arabic --all dating from 19 years after Muhammad’s death. You have a question about the Koran you go back to those five Arabic versions----all identical—

But that Muslim Imam was wrong in a way, because it’s not the **variety** of sources and the **various translations** that is at the heart of our problem when we study our holy texts. The biggest problem in our study of holy scripture has to do with its **interpretation**. That’s what causes so much debate and controversy. It’s as true of Koran study as it is of Bible study. As a case in point, for one Muslim the word Jihad, found in the Koran, refers to an inner struggle to be obedient to God; but for another Muslim that same word Jihad means a holy war against infidels. Which is it? Well, we don’t know really. It depends on how you choose to interpret that word. As Soren Kirkegaard says, ““The most terrible fight is not when there is one opinion against another, the most terrible is when two men say the same thing -- and fight about the **interpretation**.” Amen to that. Something to keep in mind as we pick up today’s text.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Jewish Maccabean ruler, Aristobulus, sent a band of loyal Jews to a little town called Nazareth—his plan being to establish a Jewish outpost in the Gentile territory called Galilee. Two hundred years after its founding, when Jesus was born, Nazareth was **still** a small, neophyte community. In fact Nazareth wasn’t even a dot on most maps. Not that that mattered much to the folks in Nazareth, though. Their purpose for being wasn’t to thrive, and grow, it was simply to keep the faith —to buttress themselves emotionally, religiously and even physically against the Gentile communities that surrounded them. They did that by studying their precious holy texts—memorizing them, keeping parts of them tacked to their door posts, maybe even wearing them as frontlets on their foreheads. And they did that by teaching their children their precious traditions. They taught them of course, that they had been chosen by God; that they were beloved by God absolutely and exclusively. And they forbid their children to marry gentiles—not that they’d ever want to. Yes, to grow up in Nazareth was to grow up in a town that was protective to the point of being ingrown. Cautious of outsiders to the point of being xenophobic

We know, in fact, that when Jerusalem fell in 70 AD, the priests from Jerusalem's temple, fled to little, **not even**-dot-on- the map Nazareth. Why? That little town was conservative enough, and religiously self-conscious enough to accept these Jewish priest refugees with outstretched arms, regardless of the consequences from Rome. Yes, Nazareth was a Jewish town through and through and proud of it!

So, here comes Jesus home to Nazareth after a time away—a time away rubbing shoulders and elbows with all sorts of people, roman soldiers and farmers, tradespeople and prostitutes, fishermen and tax collectors and yes, Gentiles. It so rarely happened, that a boy from inside Nazareth would venture outside, that of course, everyone in town was curious. Then, too, even in insular Nazareth folks had gotten wind of some of the great things their boy had accomplished. Wasn't he a fine Jewish teacher and preacher? Hadn't he healed people in Capernaum? Yes, this was their boy. They had raised him right and he had done them proud.

Of course, they invite their hometown boy to read scripture and then interpret that scripture in their synagogue on the Sabbath. Everyone turns out—an old farmer leaning on his walking stick—Jesus used to help him pick up stones in his field—and he in turn taught Jesus how to skin a rabbit. Jesus' synagogue teachers are there, too—Didn't they teach him the Hebrew words he'll be reading-- The boys (now men) with whom Jesus used to build forts in the woods—they take front row seats. They'll have some catching up to do after the service. Yes, everyone files in--the synagogue is abuzz with stories about Jesus. Then Jesus stands up. Quiet descends. He picks up the scroll and begins to read. He reads from Isaiah 61, verses 1-7.

Now something we need to know about this Isaiah text if we are to understand the crowd's seemingly bizarre reaction. The text was written during the Babylonian exile. The author of Isaiah is predicting the coming of a Messiah who will lead the Jews to victory over their Babylonian oppressors. So, Jesus reads these lines, and at first as our text from Luke says, his hometown listeners are **amazed**. Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah?

Everything would have been fine, except that Jesus does two things that are counter to everything Nazareth is about. **One, he leaves out an important line of scripture—** Now here we have to assume that Jesus means to leave out that line—it isn't a mistake; And remember, the townspeople know their scripture, so they are very aware of that omission. What does he leave out? Well, although he dutifully reads: "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," what he omits is "**and the day of vengeance of our God.**" We're talking vengeance, of course to the Babylonians. But the folks in Nazareth have evidently **interpreted** that text (and there's that word, interpret) for their present circumstances.. In fact, an Aramaic **interpretation**

with commentary from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, (there's that word, again, interpretation) on this scripture passage goes like this: "You shall eat the possessions of the Gentiles and the Gentiles will be ashamed---who were formerly boasting in their lot."

The second thing that Jesus does that incites the hometown crowd is that he **interprets** for them two other passages of scripture—as an explanation for skipping the part of Isaiah that has to do with vengeance. He reminds them of two beloved prophets, Elijah and Elisha, both of whom ministered to.... Gentiles—**worthy** Gentiles. In the first instance, Jesus reminds them that although there were many widows in Israel, it is the widow from Sidon, a Gentile, who trusts God enough to give all that she has to eat and drink to Elijah. And in the second story, although there were many lepers in Israel, says Jesus, only one, Namaan, a Gentile, trusts God enough to take a dip in the Jordan and be cured of his leprosy.

No wonder the crowds are spitting nails. They had accommodated their holy texts to suit their present circumstances—you might say they had tamed the Biblical texts—taken the fire out of them—smoothed the rough edges, avoided the hard words and focused on the soothing ones. They had tamed prophesy and yes, in a sense, they had tamed God. They weren't about to have Jesus ruin scripture for them; and in effect, ruin God for them. So what do they do? Why they run him out of town. It is only by the grace of God that Jesus is spared. Somehow he is able to save himself and as scripture says, "pass through the midst of them," no doubt shaking the Nazareth dust from his worn but holy sandals.

As I said, this story is all **about interpretation**.

I want to end this sermon with a true story about my sister-in law, Nancy. She and her husband Jim live in the country, in a farm house in Marshall, Virginia. This past summer a feral cat showed up on their property. At first it wouldn't have anything to do with them. It just hung out in their barn. Then Nancy began feeding it. The cat finally let her pet it. Still, though, it mostly hung out in the barn. Then came winter. It's been so cold, and then we got that awful snow storm. One very cold, snowy night the cat came into the house through the dog door. Now it makes its home in the mud room—sleeping on a rug Nancy put in the corner there. She put a bowl of cat food and a bowl of water in there, too. It's probably only a matter of time before the cat moves into the main part of the house. Then Nancy and Jim will give it a name—if they haven't already. They will of course, want to make sure that it is neutered and de-fleaed. Who knows, with time, that lean, quasi-feral cat, may become fat and sleek and almost domesticated. I say **almost** domesticated, though, because I am told by those who know cats better than I, that a feral cat can never be **totally** domesticated. They can go for months living the domestic life but you have to look out, because it's sure to happen. The feral nature of the cat can surface without warning. One day it is sitting on your lap, purring

contendedly, the next it will suddenly reel up, take a powerful swipe at your hand or arm and lay your skin wide open. So it is with feral cats. So it is with scripture. Amen