

THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL CLAIM" (Luke 4:16-30)

8.9.20

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever heard the phrase "a cult of personality?" It's actually a useful phrase to know as we begin looking at the claims of Jesus of Nazareth - not so much what other people were saying about Him, but what He was saying about Him.

A cult of personality happens when the ruling regime of a country - or more rarely, an individual - uses the combined messaging of mass media, propaganda, "the big lie," spectacle, the arts, patriotism, and government-sponsored rallies and demonstrations to create an idealized, heroic, and even worshipful image of a leader, often through unquestioning flattery and praise. It is most often seen in totalitarian or authoritarian governments, and attempts to make the leader appear to be one of, if not, the greatest individuals in the history of the planet, making it an unbelievable privilege to be under such enlightened rule. A great 20th century example would be, of course, the Germany dictator Adolf Hitler, who used all the tools available to create such a cult of personality. The two entities became inseparable: Hitler was Germany, Germany was Hitler. As historian Robert Waite has written in stark summary, "Seldom in the history of western civilization has so much depended on one man's personality. He created his own political theory and a government that could not exist without him," encapsulated by slogans such as: "Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Fuhrer" - "One People, One Land, One Leader."

As an example of Hitler's uniquely singular hold on his nation, here are the opening words of the oath I took upon enlisting in the US Marine Corps: *"I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same."*

And here's the oath that was administered to members of the German military after August 2, 1934 (when President Paul von Hindenburg passed away and then - Chancellor Adolf Hitler moved to create dictatorial power with himself as singular head of the country): *"I swear by God this holy oath, that I will render to Adolf Hitler, Fuhrer of the German Reich and people, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, unconditional obedience, and that I am ready, as a brave soldier, to risk my life at any time for this oath."* Did you catch all that? I am not swearing loyalty and my last dying breath to constitution or people or nation; I am swearing those things singularly to Adolf Hitler. To serve Germany was really about serving only Hitler. Policies, viewpoints, decisions all became entwined with loyalty to Hitler. There ultimately was no differentiation between loyalty to military, to community, to nation or to Hitler - they were all one in the same. That's what a "cult of personality" ultimately does. It makes everything a statement of loyalty to one person. Of course, that thinking destroyed Germany - and killed tens of millions.

OK; obviously somebody like a Hitler doesn't deserve that kind of loyalty. In a sense, who does? Well, today we'll be looking at an initial response of people to our Radical Rabbi - an incredibly powerful claim that, if true, would likewise determine how lives are

lived and loyalties declared. But before we begin, let's **go the Lord in prayer.**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS (Luke 4:16-30)

[Jesus] went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom - Luke 4:16a.

Our transition from last week's events in Cana bring us to this week's setting in Nazareth. It's interesting that Luke includes that little informative insert concerning Nazareth - "where Jesus had been brought up" - to add intensity to everything that will shortly be occurring. This audience is His own people, from people who, at least at this point in His life, know Him best.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him - Luke 4:16b-17a.

Most synagogues featured a raised podium from where Scriptures were read, lessons taught, and benedictions led. The congregants typically sat on stone benches lining the interior walls. There was commonly one person who was recognized as the "leader of the synagogue" or "head of the assembly." This person would have organized the service, selecting worship leaders, inviting readers, and would have been the "face" of that particular synagogue to the outside world. As a matter of routine, the worship service would have included hymns, a reading from the Torah (the books of the law of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch (the first five books of our OT)), an additional reading from the Prophets (but only for the Sabbath service), and a sermon. While readings from the Torah were probably prescribed (what to read on a given date), readings from the Prophets may not have been similarly prescribed; therefore, it is possible that the reader could choose the text he would read. It was not uncommon for visitors to a particular synagogue to be asked, almost as a "guest of honor," to read a scripture from the sacred scrolls and even to provide a commentary on whatever was read so, while Jesus by this point is certainly getting a reputation, His being offered the opportunity to read and comment was not all that unusual.

It is also possible that Jesus simply exercised His right, as an adult member of the synagogue community, to read in the service by standing up, signaling His desire to read and, if so desired, to comment on what He had read. As Jesus went up the steps to the top of the platform, an assistant in the synagogue would have retrieved the desired scroll (in this case, Isaiah) and handed it to the reader. Per protocol, the reader would have stood while reading and then, remaining on the platform, sat down while giving commentary.

Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the [Sovereign] Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" - Luke 4:17b-19 (quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 and Isaiah 58:6).

It appears that Jesus was specifically looking for this section of Isaiah. This was a well-known messianic prophecy predicting the ministry of God's "anointed One" as salvation was brought to the long-suffering people of God. This had been Israel's dream for

centuries; unfortunately by this time, those dreams had collided with other dreams - of a reboot to the all-powerful, all-conquering times of David and Solomon, when a completely independent nation (no occupiers) was looked at with awe and envy, and for good reason: ***The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon's subjects all his life. ... [H]e ruled... and had peace on all sides. During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan (north) to Beersheba (south), lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree... The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones - I Kings 4:20-21, 24-25; 10:27a.***

It's actually little wonder that this people, harshly occupied by the Roman Empire, would yearn for a return to their past and, because of that, that God's long promised "Anointed One," would gradually become a leveler of scores and avenger setting out to right all the wrongs done to them as a nation. But in holding onto that picture, they severely risked overlooking the true meaning of these words, and the fulfillment that was staring them right in the face.

So here, sitting right in their midst is Jesus, the hometown kid. Now keep in mind that this man grew up here: People saw Him every day from the time He and His family arrived in Nazareth - playing with their kids, obediently helping His father Joseph in His business, and helping His mother Mary manage their growing household as the oldest child. They certainly felt like they knew Him.

Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him - Luke 4:20.

Remember that this is the guy who has been establishing, as part of His growing profile, an amazing reputation as a rabbi, as a teacher, as an explainer of the ancient scriptures that seems to make them come alive and be real in a way that they had never heard before. So, they are understandably anxious to hear what this guy in particular has to say about the words He just read. You can almost hear the silence now.

He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" - Luke 4:21.

Wow! What an amazing "opening" statement: "Today, literally, right now, at this precise moment, this scripture, these words I just read to you from the prophet Isaiah, is fulfilled, meaning that these prophetic words from Isaiah have now become a state of being, a matter of certainty, and it's happening right now in your hearing, in your taking in these words of his." In other words, "Isaiah's prophecy from 700 years ago - it's accomplished, right here, right now, in Me." You could almost think of this as Christ's "I AM" moment - "I AM the fulfillment, the accomplished end of these words" - declaring who He is in light of Isaiah's prophecy, but also as a declaration of divinity.

Now there are some huge implications here - most immediately that Jesus is validating Isaiah's qualifying as a true prophet of God by declaring that his words have come to

pass. God had given Moses the original "bar" of measure as to whether a prophet was truly God's spokesperson or not: ***"If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken"*** - Moses, ***Deuteronomy 18:22a***. If that's the measure, then was Jesus the fulfillment of Isaiah's words? Let's check it out:

- 1) ***The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me:*** CHECK! This happened at His baptism; remember how John the Baptist bore witness to this: ***"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Him. And I myself did not know Him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One"*** - John the Baptist, ***John 1:32b-34***.
- 2) ***[T]o proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor:*** CHECK! Ever since He began His ministry, his message had been clear; Matthew writes that: ***Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people - Matthew 4:23***. And Jesus took Isaiah's words of what the "anointed One" would be doing and cast them in far more critical and eternal spiritual terms. Look at the target audience that Isaiah saw: the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed. Those were all the spiritual wounds inflicted by Satan that had created those spiritual conditions. And what will the "anointed One" bring? Good news for those who are poor in spirit, freedom for those in spiritual prison, recovery of sight for those spiritually blind, and freedom for those spiritually oppressed. Check, check, check and CHECK!
- 3) ***[T]o proclaim the year of the Lord's favor:*** CHECK! This quotation from Isaiah 58:6 was actually a reference back to God's commands to Moses in Leviticus 25 where God proclaimed an observance called the Year of Jubilee: ***"Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you"*** - God speaking, ***Leviticus 25:10a***. A little piece of OT observance: For the nation of Israel, every seventh year was considered a "sabbatical year" for the nation; the land was allowed to rest (no plowing, no planting, no harvesting) during that time. Then, after seven sabbaticals (49 years), the next year was set apart as a "Year of Jubilee." The land remained quiet for the entire year so that both man and animal would rest and rejoice in the Lord. The significance of this year was essentially an economic reboot - slaves were freed and returned to their families, property that was sold returned to the original owners, and all debts were cancelled. Simply put, people were to be liberated from all guilt, all debt and all crimes. That is a picture of what Jesus came to do: to liberate all the people of the world from the guilt and debt and recognition of all sin. Jesus is declaring that He Himself is a literal Year of Jubilee - forever! And the mere fact of His presence showed the favor that the Lord was granting to Jews and Gentiles alike. This was not a time of vengeance or retribution. This was a time of

celebrating this season of God's grace - a reality in Christ that would not last forever but be, in the history of the planet, a very short time indeed.

Secondly, by declaring that He is the one upon whom God has poured His spirit, He is declaring that He is here not for Himself, nor is He speaking for Himself, nor is He doing for Himself but, as He would say in John's gospel: ***"For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me"*** - ***Jesus Christ, John 6:38.***

But all these things allowed Jesus to affirm Isaiah's validity as a true spokesman and prophet of God - and the proof was in Christ Himself!

Allspoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked - Luke 4:22.

The first hints of opposition begin to show. These are amazing words coming from this guy. But wait a minute: How can such words come from Him, from a guy like this? ***"Isn't this Joseph's son?"*** expects an affirmative reply, suggesting that, if this is that carpenter's son, who grew up as a carpenter, that we have known for years as a carpenter - how in the world can this "lunch pail guy," somebody who was just one of us, talk like this? And how could anybody be thinking that Isaiah was somehow talking about Him? Does He know what He's saying - and who He's saying it to? The intensity is starting to ramp up.

Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to Me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell Me, 'Do here in Your hometown what we have heard that You did in Capernaum.' Truly I tell you," He continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown" - Luke 4:23-24.

What is Jesus driving at? He knows (as only He can) that Nazareth had some great expectations of Jesus coming home, after all they had heard about Him - and possibly some had seen from Him. Great preaching, amazing healings, some things almost maybe like miracles. Well Jesus, you did that easy enough for strangers. How about showing some razzle-dazzle for us, Your hometown buds? The idea is that: "We've heard about Your power. How about a demonstration, just so we can be sure that this is something we can believe in?" Again, there is connection to John's ominous words from the beginning of his gospel (and I like the KJV's take on it): ***He came unto His own, and His own received Him not - John 1:11.***

It shortly got worse, as Jesus pointed out a couple of painful moments from Israel's past: ***"I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed - only Naaman the Syrian"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Luke 4:25-27.***

What is Christ's point? Simply this: God's extending invitation into His kingdom cannot be thwarted in any way. If the ones first targeted for this invitation refuse the graciousness of the invite, then He will turn His attention to others who will be more receptive. We have just seen what that looks like: The welcome of the Samaritans,

accepting Jesus at His word, versus the people of Cana (needing to see signs and wonders) and Nazareth, rejecting Christ and the witness of God's spokesman, Isaiah. Jesus is trying to get these people to understand that there is nothing exclusive about being a Jew in terms of God's righteous standards. The grace required to save a Gentile is precisely the same grace required to save a member of the house of Israel. And besides, the words of God to the father of their nation - Abraham - should have informed their response: ***"[A]ll peoples on earth will be blessed through you"*** - ***God speaking, Genesis 12:3b***. But in saying what He said, and apparently being understood to mean that Gentiles were more worthy of His attention than His own hometown people, Jesus ignited a firestorm - and brought to mind the words of St. Augustine: *"They love truth when it enlightens them, but hate truth when it accuses them."* For the people of Nazareth - and all people since - to accept Christ and His message is to simultaneously acknowledge both the failure of life lived in their own strength and the need of Christ's life to redeem their life. As Darrell Bock rightly points out in his book, *Jesus According To Scripture*, "Grace comes not to those who deserve it but to those who know they have no right to it" (page 98).

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove Him out of the town, and took Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw Him off the cliff. But He walked right through the crowd and went on His way - Luke 4:28-30.

Obviously, there was not a lot of spiritual food that had been taken in by that congregation. Whatever they had heard, whoever it was they were worshiping, was completely forgotten - replaced by a literal homicidal anger that drove Jesus out of the synagogue and pushed Him literally to the edge of the hill upon which Nazareth had been built. And they had pushed for wanting to see a miracle, some sign that Jesus was worth all the fuss they were hearing about Him. And right at the edge of that cliff, He gave them something to look at; He gave them a taste of who He was. But they likely missed it - He quietly walked through their midst, unbothered and unhurried, almost as if the crowd wasn't even there.

APPLICATION

Some important lessons are given us to take from these moments in Christ's life:

First, contrary to some contemporary scholars, Jesus absolutely understood and knew who He was - and His specifically choosing the scripture from Isaiah to read at this moment proves it. Isaiah's words were understood to refer to God's long promised messiah. This was no "revisionist history" to bestow this knowledge on Him long after He would have "died," like any other human being. This was Jesus defining Himself - who He was and what He was here for - for all to hear.

Second, people's response to truth does not diminish the need to share it. How did Paul caution Timothy in his second letter? ***"Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit***

their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths - Paul, II Timothy 4:2-4a. The people of Nazareth needed to hear this truth from Jesus, regardless of the response. Our faithfulness needs to be driven by only one thing: Being sold out to God through Jesus Christ. We serve to please God, not people.

Third, Jesus rules; He is so much bigger and so much more powerful than anything that man can muster. In that light, what a puny effort by these people to try to forcibly force Christ off a cliff. Solomon had it right when he wrote: *There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord - Proverbs 21:30.* And Jesus Himself said: *"No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" - Jesus Christ, John 10:18.* And we see that divine authority here. In fact, after seeing His "signs" of His power over nature (turning water to wine) and His power over both disease and distance (healing the nobleman's son in Capernaum from His location in Cana), we now see another, however subtle, display of His power: His power over people, and His power over circumstances. Nazareth remains mired in their sin, and Jesus moves on in His ministry. And God's will for His Son, regardless of the response from people, will be done - completely, and in His timing.

CONCLUSION

Maybe the most important consideration for us going forward from this lesson is a very simple question: Who is Jesus? Not who do we believe He is, or who does the Bible say He is, or anything like that. Those are academic answers. No; the question is: Who do our lives say Jesus is? Nazareth didn't like His answer.

But it's an important question. Much of the world sees Jesus as a great teacher, a major philosopher, a powerful example of a commendable life. All good things. Of course, they also see Him as dead. But the Bible declares that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords - and risen and alive forevermore. Is that what the world sees in us?

Is He clearly our King in the middle of our friendships, in the middle of our conversations? Is He clearly our King when we're asked our opinion of somebody else? Is He clearly our King when somebody has wronged us? Is He clearly our King when we are shown to be in the wrong? Is He clearly our King as our bank accounts grow, as our careers advance? Is He clearly our King when faced with difficult choices? Is He clearly our King when times get tough - in moments of grief or loss? In all our moments of life, in every moment of life, who is King - Him or us? What answer does God see? Let's pray!