

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 4:21-30

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The second half of the story of Jesus' first sermon in Luke is a total reversal of expectations. The audience assumes that Jesus' sermon means that Israel will receive consolation and reward and that the enemies of Israel will be destroyed and get nothing. In this assumption, which is a universal human assumption, the story of Isaiah's prophecy is understood to mean that "we" will finally receive the vindication, prosperity, and freedom "we" deserve and "they" will get it in the teeth. What Jesus proclaims in his interpretation of the story is that the blessings of the Kingdom of God will be extended to everyone, in particular, to our enemies.

The stories that Jesus refers to are the two classic stories of the prophets of Israel doing good for their enemies. The first is the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. There was a famine; he went to the village of Zarephath in the Gentile region of Sidon, long-time enemies of Israel. A woman came out to gather sticks. He said to her, "Give me something to eat," and she said, "I'm gathering sticks so that I can go and make a fire and cook the last part of the food and then we will eat it and die." Then Elijah says, "I don't care, get me something to eat." So she brings him the last bit of what she has to eat. He then tells her that this jar of meal and oil will feed them for months during the long famine and it does. The woman is a Gentile, a widow in a Gentile town outside of Israel.

In his sermon Jesus says, "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah the prophet, when the heavens were shut up for three years and six months, and there were many widows who died of starvation, but he was sent to none of them, but rather to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Everybody in his audience knew what that meant. Sidon was located in what is now Lebanon. During the Israeli invasion some years ago when Ariel Sharon was the general of the Israeli army, Israeli forces went right up the coast through Tyre and Sidon. These were boundaries of hostility in the ancient world as well as now.

The second story is even more graphic in relation to its offensive character as a proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Naaman was the general of the Syrian army. He carried out numerous campaigns in northern Israel and eventually the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. On one of their raids he captured a young Israelite woman and took her back to Syria as a slave. When he contracted leprosy, out of compassion for him, she told him about the prophet Elisha. He went to his king and the king sent a letter to the king of Israel asking if Naaman could speak to the prophet. When the letter was delivered, the king of Israel was offended and was sure that this was a trick that the king of Syria was using to try to conquer more of his territory, and to trick him into something, and he refused. But Elisha heard about it and said, "Send him" and so Naaman, the general of the Syrian army, went to Elisha's house. Elisha didn't even come out to see him, but rather sent a message telling him to go and bathe in the Jordan River.

Well, Naaman was really ticked and said, "Aren't the waters of the rivers of Syria better than these piddly little rivers in Judah and Israel?!" He was going to stalk off when one of his servants said, "What have you got to lose? You know, you could try it; it won't hurt you to go bathe in the river." So he does, and he is made clean.

This is the story that Jesus cites as the fulfillment of the kingdom of God: the generals of the enemies of Israel will be healed of leprosy. The way in which Jesus states it is even more provocative: "There were many lepers in Israel in the days of Elisha but none of them was cleansed, only Naaman, the Syrian." Everybody in Jesus' synagogue and in Luke's audience knew the story of Naaman and Elisha's healing him. Jesus' implication is that these two citations will be fulfilled in his ministry. That is, his proclamation is that this is what he is going to do. This is extraordinarily offensive to the people in his hometown in Nazareth. The response is extreme scandal and offense, a maximum of fury. Rather than let him loose, they try to kill him.

In telling this story, you can't overdo it in your expression of their degree of rage. Their rage can only be matched by the rage of people in the United States if it were proclaimed that the gift of the Kingdom of God would mean, for example, the healing of Osama bin Laden, or of the members of Al Qaeda. In other words, whoever is defined as the enemy of the nation is in this story identified as the one who is the target of God's grace and healing. Why? Because what Jesus proclaims is a new kingdom of peace and reconciliation—of ending the cycle of vengeance and establishment of a new government based on grace and truth and reaching out to one's enemies. This is the Gospel according to Luke.

The impact of this story is what can be called the rhetoric of implication. We are invited to identify with the people of Nazareth who are implicated in being enraged at Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel. The purpose of this story is to invite the listeners to reflect on their own response. If Jesus is the Messiah and this is the way that he is going to save the world, what does that mean about our opposition to his way? What does this mean about the character of the Kingdom of God that will be brought about by healing the enemies?

This is the very core of the repentance that the Gospel invites. It invites us to repent from our desire to have our needs for vengeance, for justice, met rather than to see a new kingdom, a new government established that is for the benefit of everyone including those who have been our ancient enemies, whoever they may be in the world. The purpose of the story is to invite everyone who hears it to reflect on their willingness to change their minds in relation to their expectations and hopes for the Kingdom of God in the future. This requires that all of us stand back, that we look at the world from above from a different perspective and see the way in which God is seeking to create a peaceful world that transcends the boundaries of human warfare and hatred.