

What Do You Expect from a Sermon?

Luke 4:16-30

In this week's scripture in Luke 4:16-30, we read about a time when Jesus was preaching in the synagogue—where he read from the prophet Isaiah, sat down to preach, and when, afterwards, the crowd was ready to throw Jesus off a cliff. What do you expect from a sermon is a question that preachers wonder from time to time. What do you do when you hear a sermon that upsets or angers you?

People usually have different answers to the question about what they expect from a sermon. Some want to be comforted. Some want to be challenged. Some want to be entertained. Some want to be inspired to do God's will. Some want a Bible lesson.

Some answers given to preachers are: "I like a sermon that helps me think about a biblical passage in a new and fresh way." "I think a sermon ought to point out ways that I have gone wrong and to suggest ways that I can get my life back on track." "I want inspiration from a sermon, a feeling that I have been taken to a higher place or have been given a special feeling as the result of the sermon." "The best sermons are those that give me something that's easy to remember, something I can take home with me."

Our scripture asks, what do we think those people in Nazareth were expecting when Jesus read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and then sat down to preach? If it was any of those things people today commonly say that they want from a sermon, they probably were disappointed. And yet, what Jesus did in that sermon is exactly what preachers are supposed to do, even if it makes people want to take them out to the edge of town and throw them off a cliff.

Jesus reads wonderful words of promise from Isaiah: *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to preach the year of God's favor. These words have been fulfilled in your hearing."*

At first, the congregation is thinking at last, God is making good on God's promises. At last, God is coming for us. Good news! They were having themselves a nice praise service. Jesus had them eating out of his hand. Then Jesus reminds them what happened the last time God showed up for the people of Israel.

There was a famine and the prophet Elijah was sent by God to feed a Gentile pagan woman, even though there were many hungry Jewish women. Then Jesus reminded the congregation there were lots of Jewish people suffering from various illnesses during the time of the prophet Elisha, yet God sent Elisha to heal a Syrian army officer, a foreigner. The people were reminded the last time the day of deliverance came, God behaved in ways they did not expect and did not appreciate. So they got mad and tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.

We do not want to be reminded that God has behaved in ways that are different from our expectations.

A Rabbi says, "Judaism is a rather simple religion that is based on two profound articles of faith. One, there is only one God. Two, you are not it."

Do we expect a sermon to challenge our conceptions of God that we firmly hold on to? Are we open to allowing scripture to correct, expand, critique, enrich our idea of who God is and what God is up to? Is an effective sermon one that reminds us that God is God and we are not?

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

Bob