

**Message: Don't Shrink Back**

A devout old shepherd lost his favorite Bible while he was out looking for a lost lamb. Three weeks later, a sheep walked up to him carrying the Bible in its mouth. The shepherd couldn't believe his eyes. He took the book out of the sheep's mouth, raised his eyes to heaven and said, "It's a miracle!"

"Not really," said the sheep. "Your name is written inside the cover."<sup>1</sup>

**Sometimes things happen that don't meet our expectations.** How we respond makes a big difference. That's a key lesson from our scripture reading for today, Luke 4:21-30. We're looking at the second half of Luke's narrative about when Jesus visited his hometown, Nazareth.

**To recap, Jesus was on a tour of Galilee, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.** He was teaching in synagogues. So he went to his hometown, Nazareth. On the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue as he normally did. The attendant handed Jesus the scroll of Isaiah, and Jesus read God's promise to send a Messiah to care for those in need. Then he announced, "*Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it*" (v21). Jesus revealed that he was the anointed one, sent by God.

**How did the people respond to Jesus?** Initially, they liked the way he spoke (v22). They were surprised that someone from their small town, someone they knew, Joseph's son, could speak like this. They didn't admire or appreciate what he said, just the way he presented himself. They didn't take the message to heart – they didn't get it.

**Jesus' neighbors accepted his words and were amazed until two things happened.** First, Jesus refused to perform any miracles for them. Second, he briefly mentioned two stories from scripture. One of the stories is about Elijah and one about Elisha. I'll tell you Elijah's story.

**God sent Elijah the prophet to a foreign land during a 3-1/2 year drought.** The story is found in 1 Kings 17. God told Elijah to go. Elijah was living in the wilderness and didn't have any means to live. So God told Elijah a widow would care for him.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.stewardshipoflife.org](http://www.stewardshipoflife.org)

“As Elijah came to the entrance of the village he met a woman, a widow, gathering firewood. He asked her, *‘Please, would you bring me a little water in a jug? I need a drink.’* As she went to get it, he called out, *‘And while you’re at it, would you bring me something to eat?’*

She said, *‘I swear, as surely as your GOD lives, I don’t have so much as a biscuit. I have a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a bottle; you found me scratching together just enough firewood to make a last meal for my son and me. After we eat it, we’ll die.’*

Elijah said to her, *‘Don’t worry about a thing. Go ahead and do what you’ve said. But first make a small biscuit for me and bring it back here. Then go ahead and make a meal from what’s left for you and your son. This is the word of the GOD of Israel: “The jar of flour will not run out and the bottle of oil will not become empty before GOD sends rain on the land and ends this drought.”’*

And she went right off and did it, did just as Elijah asked. And it turned out as he said - daily food for her and her family. The jar of meal didn’t run out and the bottle of oil didn’t become empty: GOD’s promise fulfilled to the letter, exactly as Elijah had delivered it!” (1 Kings 17:10-16, MSG).

A little later, the woman’s son became sick and then he died. Elijah prayed to God and the boy returned to life. The woman said, *“I see it all now - you are a holy man. When you speak, GOD speaks - a true word!”* (v24). Elijah was a great prophet. People were already talking about Jesus in the same way.

**Jesus doesn’t say that the prophets Elijah and Elisha went to Gentiles because they were rejected by the Jews.** Elijah and Elisha went because they were sent there by God. Foreigners heard God speak more clearly. As they talk, Jesus’ neighbors are becoming more and more upset. They realize Jesus isn’t going to do special favors for them. **The people became furious.** They drove Jesus out of town. They took Jesus to the edge of a hill and threatened to throw him off it. That’s actually the first part of stoning. We don’t know how, but Jesus passed through the angry crowd and left.

**Why were the people so angry?** The two stories had a common theme: they were about foreigners being more open to the work of God than they were. They got Jesus’ hint: people from his own village were less open to God than their foreign neighbors were.

**The word “welcome” in v24 is the same one used in v19 to describe “the year of the Lord's favor.”** God wants to welcome the people, but the double use of the word may show that they aren’t welcoming the one who tells them about God's grace. Jesus quotes a common saying: anyone who achieves greatness is never fully trusted back home. The meaning goes deeper: Jesus is like the prophets who were rejected by their own people.

**Luke is highlighting a tension that continued during Jesus’ lifetime, ultimately ending on a cross.** That tension still exists today. Jesus tells us we’ll experience it, *“Everyone will hate you because of my name. But whoever stands firm until the end will be saved”* (Mark 13:13 CEB).

**Jesus is NOT Superman!** You know that mythology. Superman or Superwoman is someone who looks like an ordinary human being, but is really an all-powerful being in disguise. That’s not the picture we see when we look at today’s passage. Jesus is a real person with a real family and a real history.

**Everyone knew Jesus as a child.** As they used to say when I was a boy, “they had seen him in short pants.” He was an ordinary child with an ordinary childhood. They knew him as a teenager and as a young adult. There are a number of fanciful stories out there, including Anne Rice’s latest “The Young Messiah.” These are fiction only.

**I have to ask: if the neighbors knew Jesus was special, would they have reacted they way they did?**

**Jesus is clearly flesh and blood.** Bullets bounce off Superman. Bullets would not bounce off Jesus. In fact, we know that thorns pierced his head, whips cut his body, his face was bruised beyond recognition from beating by the Roman soldiers, nails pierced his hands and feet, and a spear pierced his side. Apostles worried when he didn’t eat.

**Jesus was a real, flesh-and-blood person.** He’s normal in every way that humans are. Yet, in a mysterious way, he’s also the Son of God, the Messiah, God made flesh. He’s filled with a supernatural power and authority by God’s Spirit. To accept Jesus is to accept God. To reject Jesus is to reject God.

**Why were the people so angry?** They were angry because Jesus called them out on their hypocrisy. God isn’t about the show. God doesn’t do miracles to impress or for entertainment. God’s miracles are solely for the purpose of bringing glory and honor to God. That means God’s works are done for those who see God’s presence and believe. That was true in Jesus’ time and it’s true today.

**How will we respond?** Some people recognize God in Jesus’ birth, life and work. Others don’t. Jesus’ life and message causes both wonder and rejection, two reactions people have always had. You all know it.

**What response did you get the last time you said Jesus’ name?** Eye rolling, murmuring, people looking or turning away, and silence are most common. Laughter, jokes or rude comments, even arguments are the next level of response. For some, sharing their faith means loss of home, work, family or even losing their life.

**If it was important for Jesus to start by sharing the message with his family and friends, why do we hesitate?** God is still at work today. Not someday in future, in another country or in some ambiguous way. Jesus’ message has implications here and now.

**How do you respond when you hear Jesus’ message?**

**Some of us are like Jesus’ neighbors.** We think Jesus’ words are good – as long as they fit our view and make us comfortable. Unless and until we see God working in our lives, we won’t go out of our way to get involved. We prefer to stand on the sidelines and watch.

**Some of us are like Jesus’ disciples.** Jesus’ words and life connect to something inside us. We want to know more. But we’re still filled with doubts and uncertainty. At the first sign of risk or trial, we deny him and run away, more concerned about our safety and reputation than about doing what is right in the sight of God. Even Judas was a disciple.

**Some of us are like Jesus’ family.** Those closest to Jesus saw him and knew him for who and what he was. Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary. Jesus was also the son of God, the Messiah, our Lord and Savior. There is nothing more important in life than loving him and following him, no matter what. We enjoy the game of life.

**Receiving God’s blessing comes with a responsibility: passing God’s blessing on to others.** That means sharing our life and faith with other people in a loving way. It means inviting people to our home, church and activities because we love and care for them. And yes, in the normal course of events, sharing our joy in Jesus with them. It means raising our children to know Jesus. It means loving others even when they reject us and what we believe.

**Don’t shrink back.** Taking a risk and reaching out to others is the hardest part of following Jesus. It’s also the most fulfilling. There’s nothing like someone giving their life to Christ. Don’t wait. The journey lasts a lifetime, but it starts with a step today.

Let us pray ...

*God of mercy and justice, we come to you today, humbled by the way Jesus lived. With boldness and courage, he shared God’s promise with those who knew him best. And, in looking for an authentic and loving response, he suffered rejection from those he loved. Love is what led him on that path. Lord, give us the courage to love and live with the same boldness, speaking to our family, friends and others we know. And, in so doing, let us love as Jesus did. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Jeremiah 1:4-10 (CEB)**

The LORD’s word came to me:

“Before I created you in the womb I knew you;  
before you were born I set you apart;  
I made you a prophet to the nations.”

“Ah, LORD God,” I said, “I don’t know how to speak  
because I’m only a child.”

The LORD responded,

“Don’t say, ‘I’m only a child.’  
Where I send you, you must go;  
what I tell you, you must say.

Don’t be afraid of them,  
because I’m with you to rescue you,”  
declares the LORD.

Then the LORD stretched out his hand,  
touched my mouth, and said to me,  
“I’m putting my words in your mouth.

This very day I appoint you over nations and empires,  
to dig up and pull down,  
to destroy and demolish,  
to build and plant.”

**Luke 4:21-30 (CEB)**

He began to explain to them, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”

Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, “This is Joseph’s son, isn’t it?”

Then Jesus said to them, “Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: ‘Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we’ve heard you did in Capernaum.’” He said, “I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet’s hometown. And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah’s time, when it didn’t rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed.”

When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.