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From Surprise to Shock: A Reflection on Luke 4:16-30 and the Implications for Seventh-day Adventist Mission

Introduction


This article offers a study of Luke 4:16-30 in an attempt to encourage Seventh-day Adventists engaged with the church’s mission toward a more inclusive approach in their efforts. As the study of the text will reveal, no one should ever become comfortable with their understanding of where God is at work in the world. The Spirit of Jesus is always out ahead us, waiting to reveal his Kingdom to us in new places and new ways with new faces.

The Heart of Jesus’ Mission

When it comes to Luke 4:16-30, one may ask if anything else can be said about this text. A simple query of the passage at a seminary library or an academic search engine reveals a plethora of scholarly study on the subject. It is not surprising, as Paul Hertig asserts, “There may be no better way to get to the heart of Jesus’ mission than to study Jesus’ inaugural address in his hometown Nazareth synagogue” (1998:167).

While the synagogue pericope is found in all three Synoptic Gospels, the story is placed much earlier in Luke than in Matthew or Mark. In the Lukan account it is found immediately after Jesus begins his Galilean ministry. Whereas in Matthew 13:54-58 and Mark 6:1-6 the story is found
later in Jesus’ ministry as he begins his journey to the cross. Not only does Luke’s version happen earlier, his content differs also, such as Jesus’ words to the synagogue attendants. Some conclude that these accounts are completely different stories. This may be so, however Luke seems more concerned with developing a theological theme than providing a chronological account. As Fred Craddock notes, “This event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church” (1990:61).

When the context of Luke 4:16-30 is considered, both in Jesus’ own ministry and Luke’s editorial use, it is not difficult to see why Matthey refers to this as “Jesus’ Mission Manifesto.” He writes,

Placed just after the Spirit’s descent on Jesus—his empowering for mission—and the temptation, which pictures the missionary methods and tasks Jesus refused to use and accomplish, this text inserted between two editorial summaries (vs. 14-15 and 31-32), has all the characteristics of a programmatic manifesto or policy document. It can be read as the Spirit’s mission manifesto revealing the Spirit’s priorities as formulated through a combination of texts taken from the Prophet Isaiah. Second, Luke 4 reveals something of Jesus’ own priorities, and shows how he understood his specific role within God’s mission. (2000:3)

From Surprise to Shock

I preached on Luke 4:16-30 a few years ago. In preparing my sermon I especially noted the reaction of the synagogue attendants in the text. I focused on this reaction in the sermon, seeing it as a clue for application in our missional context today. I wish to do so in my study now as well.

As Luke tells us, Jesus returns to Nazareth, his hometown. It is the Sabbath day and according to Jesus’ custom, Jesus visited the local synagogue. We can imagine that many members of this congregation witnessed Jesus grow up, some may have been his friends, maybe even childhood playmates.

At the synagogue Jesus stands up to read from the Scriptures, but it is not clear if he was invited to do so or he took his own initiative. Either way he is handed the scrolls and he chose to read from the Prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
    For he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
    That the blind will see,
That the oppressed will be set free,
    And that the time of the Lord’s favor has come. (Luke 4:18–19, NRSV)
With that Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. And “all the eyes of the synagogue were fixed on him” (4:20). The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates ἀτενίζω as “fixed on.” It can also be translated as “look intently at” or “stare at.” Luke’s description is significant. He gives the sense that the people were captivated by what Jesus was doing. Why? Did he not simply read from the Scriptures as was likely the weekly custom at the synagogue?

Considering the context of where Luke places the story in his Gospel account, Jesus had most likely already begun his Galilean ministry. Luke says, “A report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone” (Luke 4:14-15). Jesus’ reputation precedes him to Nazareth. When the Luke account is taken alongside Matthew 4, it is easy to imagine that the praise included talk of a man filled with the Spirit of God, who performs miracles—the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the possessed are set free, even the dead are raised! And now Jesus has returned home to teach in their synagogue as well. It is not surprising they listen with expectation.

Added to Jesus’ already growing reputation is the fact that he chooses to read from the Prophet Isaiah. And not just any passage from Isaiah, he chooses a messianic passage, a jubilee passage, a passage that is the sum of their hope as a people—indicating the time of the Lord’s favor (Isa 61:1-2; 58:6). Matthey has noted in his analysis of Luke 4:16-30 that while it may have been far from reality, the Jubilee year was an important concept in Jewish thinking of the time. Jubilee reminded them of economic and religious unity among the people of God; it reminded that that they were one nation and one legal system (2000:7). Matthey writes:

In that system, every 49 years, everyone who had not been able to regain his land was given it back. This was one of the “legal institutions” that allowed for everyone, at certain periods, to start their lives again, with equal chances. While never put into practice as such (most probably), that principle still remained a model for correcting growing economic and social injustice. Together with the ten commandments and sabbatical and remission years, it was like a ‘legal incarnation’ of the prophet’s message. (2000:7)

Knowing this, the people in the synagogue quickly connect the dots. Is it possible? A Galilean? And not just a Galilean, someone from the town of Nazareth who is saying these things? Galileans were common people who had intermarried with Gentiles. They were religiously uneducated and considered “unwashed” people of the land. The upper class people of the South despised Jesus and his fellow Nazarenes, they spat on them
with contempt. Nothing good was expected to come from there.

So Jesus read from the Scriptures, he read of time when the Lord’s favor will rest on their people. They have longed for this day for centuries. All of Israel and Judah have longed for this day, surrounded by nations that had oppressed them, occupied them, controlled them. Now, finally, once and for all, they will be the nation on top.

But these poor country people realize another implication of this as well. They are looked down upon by their rich cousins in cities like Jerusalem. But now, if true, the Scriptures are going to be fulfilled in Jesus, the hometown boy. He is one of them. They know the implications. A Nazarene will be on top and they will rule with him.

With all of these thoughts likely on their minds in the synagogue that Sabbath day, Jesus closes the scroll, hands it to the attendant, sits down, and says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). And Luke writes, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (v. 22).

Note the use of the word “amazed.” That is how the NRSV translates θαυμάζω. It may also be translated astonished, wonder, wondered, wondering, or even marveled. Any of those choices conveys the idea that the people in the synagogue that day were deeply moved by what Jesus has told them. It also conveys the idea that they responded to Jesus’ “gracious words” positively. Herein lies the surprise, for their positive attitude is not to last.

Observing their reaction it appears Jesus chooses to not leave well enough alone, so he says to his fellow townspeople: “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum’” (Luke 4:23, NRSV).

Then Jesus says:

Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:24-25, NRSV)

And Luke writes:

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They
got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (Luke 4:28-30, NRSV)

The synagogue went from *surprise* to *shock*. One moment they were amazed. The next they were enraged. What brought them from being ready to praise Jesus to being ready to murder him?

Jesus uses two stories from their history. In the first story he uses the Prophet Elijah (1 Kgs 17). There was a famine in the land, Elijah was being hunted down by his enemies, God came to his aid through a widow in the land of Sidon. In the second story, he uses Prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 5) when Naaman, a Syrian military officer with leprosy is healed after Elisha tells him to bathe in the Jordan River several times.

It is important to notice how Jesus prefaces each story. In the first case, he notes how there were *many* widows in the land in Elijah’s day, but “Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zaraphath in Sidon (Luke 4:25, 26). In the second case, he notes how there were many lepers in Israel in Elisha’s day, but “none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:26, 27).

In both cases Jesus showed how God has blessed outsiders—enemies of Israel. Sidon and Syria are mentioned numerous times in the Scriptures, often as the oppressors and occupiers of Israel. They were Gentiles, considered cursed by God. And the thought that God would reveal himself to an outsider, that he would link them together—insider and outsider—is unthinkable, and it sends them into a murderous rage. Reflecting on Jesus’ actions Matthey writes:

Jesus proclaims that God’s liberating power and solidarity is not exclusively meant for the benefit if the physical descendants to the patriarchs, of the people of the exodus and the great prophets. God’s mission has a universal scope—transcending any ethnic, cultural, social, racial or confessional barrier. God’s preferential option for the poor is not for the poor of Israel only, and may even give priority to others. (2000:6)

**Jesus’ Boundary-Breaking Gospel**

If there is one thing to take away from the synagogue pericope in Luke 4:16-30, it is that the church cannot tell God where he can and cannot be present. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob reveals himself wherever and to whoever he chooses. We cannot tell God what God should do. God is not under our bidding. God will not do a miracle for us either just because we want him to. God will love and bless and help whomever he
wants to love and bless and help. If God decides to miraculously feed a widow in Zaraphath, that’s what God will do. If God decides to heal Naaman, the Syrian, that’s what God will do. If God decides to bless someone who is an illegal immigrant, or homosexual, or an atheist, or a self-righteous Adventist, or even a racist Christian, that is what God will do. If God decides to care for a Muslim from Iran or a terrorist from Afghanistan, that’s what God will do. This story reminds us that no one is Christ’s “special people” to the exclusion of others.

Scripture is filled with shocking revelations of God. Consider the birth of Jesus. Matthew tells us in his Gospel that Jesus was visited by Magi from the East. We should remind ourselves that these were not the regal wise men of our nativities at Christmas. Danielle Shroyer believes it is very easy to forget the fact that these men were very likely pagan astrologers who felt compelled to search for God though a star. She writes in her book, *The Boundary-Breaking God*: “From the very beginning of Jesus’ life on earth, God makes it clear this Messiah is going to muddy the lines between who is in and who is out. The story of the astrologers is the story of God’s expanding love from the viewpoint of unexpected outsiders” (2009:40).

God seems to delight in breaking through boundaries, and there are lots of boundaries that need to be broken in our world. There are boundaries in our lives, boundaries in our homes, boundaries in our neighborhoods, boundaries in our schools, and boundaries in our churches. There are boundaries that need breaking in our beloved Seventh-day Adventist Church. There are boundaries that need breaking in Christianity. And there are boundaries that need breaking in our countries. Ask yourself, if God is a boundary-breaking God, am I willing to be a boundary-breaking person?

Thinking about the implications of following a boundary-breaking God may leave us feeling scared for our lives. We may be afraid God will ask us to do something we do not want to do. Maybe he will send us somewhere we do not want to go. What will we say? What will we do? As theologian Bruce Epperly points out, “Those of us who seek to follow God’s vision for our lives often have moments of utter panic when we realize where God’s lure forward may take us! (2010). In those moments when we are shocked at what God is doing, we must not be afraid. As the Psalmist says, “O Lord, you alone are my hope…. Yes, you have been with me since birth (Ps 71:5,6).” Those of us engaged in God’s mission in the world should not be afraid. We are not alone. Epperly goes on to say, “The lure forward is always greater than our perception of our gifts. But, the God who gives us a dream is always present as our companion to bring God’s vision to fullness” (2010).
Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to reflect on Jesus’ synagogue pericope as used in Luke 4:16-30. I sought to show how this passage demonstrates the radical inclusiveness of God’s in-breaking Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. It reminds us not to become comfortable with our understanding of who is in and who is out with God. God is always going beyond us, he is ahead of us, waiting for us to join him in the work he is doing in the world around us. This story reminds us to continually ask ourselves where and with whom is God at work. This is an important question for those engaged in Christian mission, and in our particular context, the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In conclusion, N. T. Wright’s commentary on Luke 4:16-30 is helpful:

This message was, and remains, shocking. Jesus’ claim to be reaching out with healing to all people, though itself a vital Jewish idea, was not what most first-century Jews wanted or expected. As we shall see, Jesus coupled it with severe warnings to his own countrymen. Unless they could see that this was the time for their God to be gracious, unless they abandoned their futile dreams of a military victory over their national enemies, they would suffer defeat themselves at every level—military, political and theological.

Here, as at the climax of the gospel story, Jesus’ challenge and warning brings about a violent reaction. The gospel still does this today, when it challenges all interests and agendas with the news of God’s surprising grace. (2004:48, 49)

Works Cited


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