

✠ Luke 4:16-30 ✠

In Nomine Iesu

It is written here that all the eyes of those in the synagogue were on Jesus. He had just read the words of Isaiah the prophet, and Isaiah was their prophet, their heritage. What would this young, inexperienced Rabbi do with the words of Isaiah? How would He interpret and expound upon them? Was this to be another lecture about how the Jews were not living according to the Law of Moses? Probably not; it would probably be a discourse on how this prophecy is going to be fulfilled by the coming Messiah. Or perhaps is being fulfilled by the righteousness of those who serve in the Temple? Or, perhaps this young Rabbi would defer to the older, wiser rabbis and scribes, and ask one of the more distinguished, learned men to expound upon Isaiah's words for Him. All eyes were fixed on Jesus, what would He do, what would He say?

Some time ago Barbara Walters did another one of her specials, this one on more heavenly matters. In fact, the title of her special was, "Heaven, does it exist?" The cover of an issue of Time Magazine in the mid nineteen-sixties was black with the title of the issue in words of red, "The Death of God." Some decades later, in the early nineties, Time Magazine issued another issue with the same black cover with these words in red, "Is God Dead?" The book, *God, Freedom, and Immortality*, written against the existence of God and Christianity in particular, has often been hailed as the leading apologetic in atheism. Yet its author, Anthony Flew, a British atheist so well renown for his attacks on God and Christianity that he was often asked by dying atheists to come and give a sort of last rites to them as a sort of priest of atheism, has renounced atheism and, while not a Christian, recognizes that there must be a God out there somewhere.

Two world-renown evolutionary scientists admitted in a court case as expert witnesses that there is no conceivable way that life originated on planet Earth. Of course, their conclusion was that life was sent here and deposited by an alien species as an experiment. So go the minds of our scientists. Stephen Hawkins, the leading physicist of our age confesses that if there is not a God, then there should be. Immanuel Kant, arguably the most influential philosopher since Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, was so convinced that God exists he went out of his way to defy reason and logic to account for the divine and made it an integral part of his world view. Friedrich Nietzsche, the German nihilist philosopher that Stalin said Hitler should dedicate his Third Reich to, proclaimed the death of God and then turned around and mourned that death like no other philosopher. Even Stalin himself, self-proclaimed atheist and hater of God, who built his empire on the premise that there is no divinity, no higher power than man, was reported by his daughter, as he lay comatose and close to death, to have sat bolt upright on his death bed and angrily and violently shake his fists at the heavens, only to fall back, dead.

No matter how the world struggles with the question of God's existence, no matter how the great minds of man wrestle with the idea of God, and no matter how much man has convinced himself that he has discovered the source of God and the arena of God, mankind cannot help but always be on the lookout for God.

What, if anything, is He going to do? Is He going to cure the ills of poverty, answer the problem of world hunger, intervene and finally bring about world peace? And what, if anything, is He going to say? Is He going to say, “You guys have tried so hard, here let me help you,” or, “Don’t worry about how you recognize me, it’s just important that you do”? Will He validate the opinions of many that He is to be worshipped in nature? Will He condescend and admit that all religions really worship Him as long as they are sincere and just have faith, no matter what they put that faith in? Or will God really turn out to be nothing more than an idea - a “god-gene” - answering questions in the fashion of our consciences and whims? The world does not know what God will do or say because they do not know who God is. Ironically, in the face of their ignorance and blasphemy it is most remarkable that even the most stalwart and devout atheists cannot escape the fact that in one way or another, like those people in the synagogue, all eyes are fixed on God.

The Jews in the synagogue that day thought that they had God contained in the writings of Moses and the Prophets in much the same way that many church-goers today think they have God confined to their carefully constructed views on morality and the freedom of the will. They thought Isaiah was the authority, they never expected Jesus to claim for Himself the fulfillment of Isaiah’s words. Such a proposition was scandalous and blasphemous. Therefore, it is appropriate that St. Luke mentions their eyes, for though they had eyes, they could not see; though they had ears, they could not hear. They were blind to the Word of God that sat before them, and deaf to His instruction.

The Jews’ eyes were fixed on God as the eyes of the world are fixed on God. When God speaks, when He acts, the world does not pay heed, it does not give homage. When the Lord of Glory and the Almighty Creator intervenes in the affairs of man they reject the divine and say that the weak and stupid are making up stories to fit their fancy and bring comfort and meaning to their troubled and meaningless lives.

The eyes of those in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus like the eyes of the world are fixed on God. They see what they want to see. They see a man; they see the son of Joseph; they see one who is delusional; they see a myth, but they do not see God. The world sees a figment of the imagination; it sees a god that panders to their wants and desires like Aladdin’s genie; it sees a grandfather in the sky that is too old and decrepit to care about man, much less bother to become one for their salvation, which they don’t think they need anyway. The world does not see a just and righteous God; it sees a God that inflicts pain and disease, famine and bloodshed. Not because we deserve such for our sins, but because God is unfair and tyrannical. In short, the world sees a god fashioned in its own image, a fallible, weak god that cannot expand the days of life or cut short the suffering of hunger. The god the world sees is useless, pathetic, weak, and truly a figment of their imagination, one who has no more power than the defecating god of the prophets of Baal.

Well, as true as this all is, so what? Do we not already know that the world does not recognize God for who He is? Are we not already aware that the myriad of religions doesn’t worship the one true God? What’s the point? Well, the point is this: the Israelites were supposed to be the people of God; chosen by God in Abraham to be His people, His nation according to the covenant of the Law. The Jews were not the poor, they were rich: they had Moses and the Prophets. They had king David and the Psalms. They had lineage and genealogy. They could trace their ancestry back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were the chosen people of the one true God. Yet here they are hearing the words of their prophet spoken by God Himself, and they do not believe. They rejected God’s Word, God’s Son.

But do not think that Scripture is merely taking an opportunity to slam the Jewish religion in an attempt to show how the Christians are better and more pleasing to God because we have accepted Jesus, for it is by grace that you have been saved so that no one may boast. No, as much as this narrative from Scripture shows Jesus fulfilling prophecy, as much as it shows Jesus battling the synagogue's ideas of God, and as much as it demonstrates that Jesus was in charge of His life and death, so also is this narrative a warning. This is a warning from Scripture.

The synagogue knew well that at the time of Elijah and Elisha Israel was being punished for their sin of idolatry and rebellion. And here this young Rabbi had the nerve to tell them that they were no better. They were filled with rage because Jesus was likening them to the widows and lepers of Israel that Elijah and Elisha did not comfort and restore. This young Rabbi had the audacity to say that the poor would receive the favor of God; that is, the Gentiles, a people who were not God's people. It was to be those who were blind who would see the glory of God; that is, those who did not have Moses and the Prophets as their heritage would gain them as their spiritual ancestors. Those enslaved would be truly free; that is, the Gentiles who were enslaved to unrighteousness and wickedness would be set free from such imprisonment. Jesus was telling those at the synagogue that though they were Jews of the first order, obedient to the Law as they understood it, they had missed the mark, they had neglected the true Word of God, they had rejected God's salvation, God's Prophet, and now it was to be given to another.

Thus, in a rage befitting the mob that chased after the monster of Frankenstein, bereft of reason and dignity and thirsty for blood and destruction, those in the synagogue bodily threw Jesus out, drug and pushed Him to the top of a steep cliff to cast Him over the side and be done with Him. They sought to destroy this man who claimed to hold the power of God in His person, for they believed that they held the power of God in their traditions and laws.

But it was not to be. Jesus walked through their midst and left them in their anger, bewilderment, and darkness. He went on from there. Such is the warning from Scripture. The world rejects Jesus as God's Son, they, like those in the synagogue, try to kill Him. Not by throwing Him off a cliff, but with the misuse of logic, fiction, stories, and anything they can invent.

Repent. How often do we think we have our eyes fixed on God only to find that He is rebuking our sins? How often do we go to the words of men instead of to the words of our Lord? How often are we like those of the synagogue, questioning the validity of Jesus' authority? Is it really true that Jesus is the only way to salvation, or did He merely say that He is a way, an option among many? Is it true that homosexuality is a sin, or was it merely a taboo in biblical times? Is it true that if we look at another woman with lust we commit adultery, or is that merely an overstated suggestion to be virtuous? Is it really true that we are born in sin, or is that just an attempt to demonstrate how much we should want God, or maybe that's the marketing of the Church so that we are convinced to buy her wares and give her our money and time?

But maybe those questions don't occur to you. Maybe you truly believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Maybe you believe homosexuality to be a sin and lust to be adultery. Perhaps you are wise enough to know that man is born in sin, in need of divine mercy and grace. But, is it true, or important, that women are not to be pastors and preachers, or are the men of the church just too pig-headed, bigoted, self-centered, and scared to have a woman up there? Is it true that on the altar sits the Body and Blood of Christ, or is it merely bread and

wine we've given too much attention to? Does Baptism really bestow salvation, or is that a lie of the monarchical church of men? Isn't it enough if we mention Jesus and His cross? Do we have to be so strict in doctrine and practice? Surely God is not so strict as all that. Surely it is far better to love our neighbor than to rebuke his sin. Do we believe that the Word of the Lord endures forever, or do we believe that the gist of the Lord endures forever? Are we unwittingly trying to kill Him with our own views of Christianity and religion?

Despite itself, the world demonstrates for us that we cannot help but fix our eyes on God, but how often do we, like those in the synagogue, think that we behold God when really we are merely staring in a mirror and all we behold is ourselves, fashioning God in our likeness?

Repent. Take heed lest you suffer the same fate as that mob. They sought to throw Jesus off the cliff, to do away with that which did not conform to their opinions and ideas. They wanted to destroy the words that convicted them in their sin and shed light on their lack of understanding. They wanted to be rid of the words that accused them of not listening to God or His prophets, and accused them of trying to mold God in their own image. They did not want to hear the words of Truth, or see the Salvation of God. And so they sought to be rid of Him. And in a somewhat ironical twist, they got exactly what they wanted. Jesus left them.

This is a warning to not neglect the Word of God but adhere to it, hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it lest it move through our midst and go somewhere else. Be wary of our security in the Word of God lest we cease to listen to it and demand that it listen to us, and by such sin have the Word of God, the Salvation of God, taken from us. Pray with a contrite heart that God would not take His Holy Spirit from us, but restore to us the joy of His Salvation.

For our God is our dear Father and we are His dear children, and He has promised to hear the prayers of His children. Praise be to God who is the Father of all mercies that He does not look at our sin or deny our prayers because of them. That for the sake of His Son's bloody and innocent death, He does not leave us bereft of grace but gives to us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we do believe His holy Word and lead godly lives according to it, help us to do this dear Father in heaven.

Praise be to God that He guards and protects us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come, will not profane the name of God among us. He has chosen you, O Israel, to be His holy people; He has come to you and redeemed you. He has raised up for you a mighty Savior born of the house of His servant David, one who would save us from our enemies. He has given a New Covenant by which we are saved, not according to the works of the Law, but according to the grace of our God. Such is the Word of God.

Jesus has come to proclaim good news to the poor. Because you are too poor to buy it yourself, Jesus paid the price of death and has bought your salvation for you. Though through your sins you are blind to God's will, Jesus comes and gives you sight; for Jesus is the light of the world by which you see the true God in the face of Christ Jesus. Though you were trapped and oppressed by sin, death, and the devil, Jesus comes to proclaim freedom to the captives for He has broken the chains of death and hell and set you free to be the people of God, holy and righteous in His sight all the days of your lives. Fix your eyes on Jesus who is the author and perfecter of your faith.

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠