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**THE WORD IS MOST IMPORTANT**
**Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, 2019**
**Luke 4:16-30**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel read before, Luke 4:16-30: <sup>16</sup> **Then Jesus went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. On the Sabbath He went into the synagogue, as His custom was, and stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> He was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, He found the place where Scripture had said: <sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is on Me because He has anointed Me to tell the Good News to poor people. He has sent Me to announce freedom to prisoners and restoration of sight to blind people, to set free those who have been oppressed, <sup>19</sup> and to announce the acceptable year of the Lord.”**

<sup>20</sup> **He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. <sup>21</sup> He began to tell them, “Today, while you are listening, this passage of Scripture has been fulfilled.”**

<sup>22</sup> **All spoke well of Him and were astonished at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth. They were asking, “Is This not Joseph’s son?”**

<sup>23</sup> **He told them: “You will surely say this proverb to Me, ‘Doctor, heal yourself!’ and say, ‘Do the same things here in Your hometown as we have heard that You have done at Capernaum!’” <sup>24</sup> He added, “Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. <sup>25</sup> However, I tell you truly, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months and there was a severe famine all over the land. <sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them but to a widow at Zarephath in the territory of Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha. Yet none of them was made clean, only Naaman the Syrian.”**

<sup>28</sup> **All the people in the synagogue were filled with anger when they heard these things. <sup>29</sup> They got up, drove Him out of the city and took Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, to throw Him down the cliff. <sup>30</sup> However, He walked right through them and went on His way.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

At His baptism, Jesus had heard the voice of His Father, and the Spirit coming down to rest upon Him. This voice from heaven and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit truly revealed that Jesus is the Son of God. Today’s Epiphany worship reveals Jesus’ manifestation of His Messiahship to those of His hometown Nazareth.

News about Jesus and His activities had spread throughout the whole countryside as He went into the village synagogues to teach the people. These synagogues were the buildings where the people assembled for worship and study of the Old Testament.

On one particular occasion, Luke reported that **Jesus went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. On the Sabbath He went into the synagogue, as His custom was, and stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> He was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, He found the place where Scripture had said: <sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is on Me because He has anointed Me to tell the Good News to poor people. He has sent Me to announce freedom to prisoners and restoration of sight to blind people, to set free those who have been oppressed, <sup>19</sup> and to announce the acceptable year of the Lord.”**

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We can only imagine the reaction of the people. Luke says that **All spoke well of Him and were astonished at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth.** Could this really be the Saviour or was He someone else? Many stories had been heard about what Jesus had been doing in the surrounding villages, so it was quite possible that He

was the Messiah. However, wasn't He also Joseph's Son? Since He had grown up no different than any other boy, could He really be the Messiah?

These people of Nazareth needed convincing that Jesus was someone more than a gifted Bible student. So, if He is going to call Himself the Messiah, then He had better prove it by some miraculous way, such as performing some kind of miracle.

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus addressed them by saying: **"You will surely say this proverb to Me, 'Doctor, heal yourself!' and say, 'Do the same things here in Your hometown as we have heard that You have done at Capernaum!'"** <sup>24</sup> He added, **"Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown."** <sup>25</sup> However, I tell you truly, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months and there was a severe famine all over the land. <sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them but to a widow at Zarephath in the territory of Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha. Yet none of them was made clean, only Naaman the Syrian."

With this remark, Jesus states that words are more important than miracles. Using characters they were all familiar with from the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus says that Elijah was a great prophet, but in a time of great famine, he only helped out one Gentile widow while many others starved.<sup>1</sup> Elisha had a double portion of Elijah's spirit, and yet he only helped out Naaman the Syrian, while many others died of leprosy.<sup>2</sup> The people may have wanted many more miracles from Elijah and Elisha; however, that was not what the prophets were sent to do. They were sent to proclaim God's Word. The occasional miracle performed was only to serve notice of their authority. If they would have spent more of their time performing miracles, no doubt they would have been quite popular among the people, but they then wouldn't be doing what God wanted them to do.

It was exactly the same now with Jesus. He had come as Prophet, Priest and King – the proclaimer of God's Word. In fact, Jesus not only preaches God's Word, He is the Word.<sup>3</sup> Yes, He would perform miracles along the way, making the blind see and the deaf hear, the leper would be cleansed and the lame healed, but only because of the Word, and the fulfilment of the Word.

By fulfilling the Word with *occasional* miracles, Jesus clearly demonstrated that He was the Saviour to be listened to, but the Word He spoke was by far more important than any miracles He performed. The people He helped with His miracles would still someday die. These miracles would only last for a little while, but the Word Jesus proclaimed was far different: It was the eternal Word of the kingdom of heaven. It proclaimed eternal life to all who believed, it told of the wonderful forgiveness granted unto all men who would follow Him. Only a few were healed, but this Word of salvation was for all, and *that* is what the Saviour was all about.

Where people believe the Word and thus honour it, Jesus performs many miracles. but where people do not believe Him, few miracles take place. This only goes to show that the rejection of Jesus and His Word shows that people do not want His help. Like the prophets of old, Jesus had worked wonders, but His focus was on the Word of God, and just like the prophets of old, He was rejected. If all Jesus was going to do is talk and not perform any miracles, then He's not the Saviour the people wanted. That is why <sup>28</sup> **all the people in the synagogue were filled with anger when they heard these things.** <sup>29</sup> **They got up, drove Him out of the city and took Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, to throw Him down the cliff.**

It is rather ironic that the people do get a miracle: Jesus **walked right through them and went on His way**. They would not have seen that miracle coming! It was not yet the time for the Saviour to die, and no one could put Him to death until He would walk willingly to Calvary, allowing Himself to be crucified. He would faithfully keep the Word. Being faithful to the Word, Jesus was going to keep His Word, so that you and I may have salvation.

The world of today has not changed much since Jesus walked this earth. Today, the world still considers the message of Christ crucified as something completely and utterly useless, worthless, and very impractical and irrelevant. This is perhaps the reason why non-Christian churches – cults - appear to be treated with more respect and tolerance than Christian churches.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 17:8ff

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 5:1ff

<sup>3</sup> John 1:1

Going back to Elijah and Elisha, we see that while they were performing signs and wonders, they were very popular, but when they and other prophets taught God's Word and warned of His righteous judgment, what happened? The people did not care for what they had to say, and even tried to kill the prophets. Look at Jesus in the synagogue. Here He told the worshippers that they were now looking at the Messiah who had come to serve them by going the way of the cross, by fulfilling Scripture for them. This should have brought them nothing but joy, and yet, because He would not perform any miracles, they thought of Him as being completely useless and good for nothing. He was of no use to them, and so they were going to kill Him by throwing Him down the cliff.

But here's the thing people often forgot: Whether they hear or reject those who preach the Word, it is still the Lord's Word. And whether or not they receive the Word, it is still most useful, for it proclaims the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, all for the sake of Jesus Christ, who was crucified, and risen. The worth of the Word is not determined by how sinners treat it. Its value is determined by the Saviour who speaks it.

Today many churches that call themselves Christian join with the world in devaluing the Word of God. The Word is watered down so as to make it more tolerable or compatible with the world. Such things like homosexuality, abortion, and same-sex marriage are rarely mentioned as being evil. Instead, they have become acceptable in many churches. Any church that speaks out against such evil is soon condemned and thought of as being bigoted and in need of being condemned, and the attacks are endless.

Of course, as believers of Christ, and in obedience to God's Word, we seek to help those who are in need, no matter who they are. But we do not sacrifice God's Law and approve of sin in order to gain the world's approval, and God forbid that we sacrifice the Gospel in order to please the world, because whether or not the world is pleased or understanding, the Gospel is what the world most dearly needs. If we fail to preach God's Law clearly and appropriately, then the world will never hear that it is sinful and needs forgiveness. If we fail to preach God's Gospel clearly, then the world will never hear that Christ has died to redeem the world. Even if the world does not understand the message of the Church and considers it useless, the Gospel we proclaim is that which offers eternal life to all who hear. We must never devalue the Word based on the world's opinion but proclaim it for what it is: The salvation of God! We must never seek to make our worship user-friendly in a way that diminishes the proclamation of Law and Gospel; rather, we proclaim the full Word of God - both Law and Gospel - each week so that all who hear may repent and be forgiven.

But it is not only inside the walls of the church building where this should happen. As individual Christians we have the opportunity and privilege of sharing the hope that is within us<sup>4</sup> and defending it. In other words, we must witness. Sadly, this is a privilege that doesn't appeal to many Christians for two reasons.

The first one is *a lack of confidence*. Quite often it is said by many, "*If I only knew what to say, I'd be okay.*" The simple solution for this is: Read and study your Bible daily, even if it's only a few verses. Grow in your knowledge of God's Word. The more you know of something, the more confident you will be in speaking about it. You do not need to know everything, but a little knowledge goes a long way. The more you know about what the Bible teaches, the readier you will be able to explain what it says.

Second, the other reason why witnessing does not appeal to many is *the reaction they fear they will receive*. In other words, many have the fear that those to whom they witness will consider them a bit crazy and 'different.' In fact, those who hear the Gospel may react quite angrily. So, because of fear, the Christian keeps his mouth shut. But look at our Gospel lesson for today. If what Jesus proclaimed was the truth, and it was, and He was rejected and crucified for it, should any of us expect universal approval? Hardly. In preaching the Gospel to an unbeliever, we should expect the reaction often to be one of rejection or dismissal, sometimes with a bit of anger thrown in. Maybe this is because we may have been a bit rude in our presentation, or it could be because what we said was right and true, and Christ was the stumbling block that offended them.<sup>5</sup>

The lesson for us is that if we allow ourselves to be guided by the world's wisdom and cease to preserve and proclaim God's Law and Gospel, then we are saying with the world that God's Word is totally and utterly useless. It has to be, since this is what the world thinks, and the world knows best. Furthermore, if we cease to share God's Word

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:23

with others because we think we are doing something wrong when it offends, then we are doubting God's Word, and don't really trust in Him.

Thankfully, there is the good news. Whether or not we or the world place a high value on the Gospel, it remains the Lord's effective Word for salvation and the forgiveness of sins. The Lord continues to send forth His Word, and it will not return empty. Right up until the end of time the Lord will continue to call people to repentance. He will continue to send out His Gospel no matter what the world thinks. His sheep are scattered, and He will not rest until they are gathered into His fold.

It is true that the Lord did not heal everyone who was blind, deaf or lame, and it is true that He performed these miracles chiefly to demonstrate that He was the Saviour. But it is also true that, by these miracles, the Lord gave a glimpse of heaven. If any of us are afflicted in mind or body, then take heart: The Lord will heal us of all our diseases on the Day of Resurrection – not just for a little while, but for eternity.

That is the hope we proclaim. The world will always reject Christ as being someone useless and of no value whatsoever. We ourselves too, in times of weakness, will cease to put our complete faith and trust in Him. We will continue to question His ways and why things happen the way they do, and we will continue to keep our mouths shut when they should be open, telling of the Gospel message. But here is a proclamation that should give much joy, for even though God's Word highlights our sin, yet it also tells of our forgiveness, not from someone completely useless, but from Christ Himself. Even if we do not find it useful today, Christ still died and rose for us. Even if at times we feel no practicality, God declares us forgiven of all our sins because of Christ. Because there is life in Christ, there is also salvation. God grant this to you all. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for wanting all people to worship You in spirit and in truth, and for making that possible by the light of Your Word. We, Your people, who have gathered to worship and praise You, now offer You our thanksgiving, praise, and prayer.

We thank You, Father, for sending Your Son Jesus Christ, and for making known through Him Your loving purpose that all who believe in Him may have everlasting life. We give You thanks for our redemption through His cross, for the forgiveness of our sins, for deliverance from all evil, and for the sure hope of eternal glory. We praise You for the gift of Your infallible Word, through which Your Spirit has given us saving faith. Send forth Your Word with power so that many may come from east and west and rejoice in Your saving mercy. May Your kingdom be filled with believers from every nation and tribe though they are sinners like ourselves, so that heaven and earth together may ring with praise for Your great salvation in Christ.

Renew our minds. Cleanse us from every sin. Lead us along the path to eternal life. Grant that we may trust Your love and power. As we live out our short spans of life, make us spiritually wise, so that in humility, forgiveness, and love, even to those who hate us, we may reflect Your grace. Help us so that we may not be conquered by evil, but may rather conquer all evil with good. Grant that we may use well the charismatic gifts that You have provided for the good of all. Heal us of every disease. Uphold those who face the test of sickness or other suffering. Guard our loved ones wherever they may be. Shield us from the powers of wickedness. Give us each day our daily bread, and make us contented in every circumstance.

Watch over Your Church. Give it pastors who are true shepherds and faithful teachers of Your people.

Give wisdom and understanding to those who are entrusted with the responsibilities of governing our country. Grant them a concern for Your will, and the desire to rule in such a way that all people may live in quietness and peace.

These things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer who loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it. Amen.

## THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

<sup>1</sup> All the people gathered like one man in the square in front of the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to fetch the scroll of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel to follow. <sup>2</sup> Then Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which included men and women and all the others who could understand what they heard. This was on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup> He read aloud from it as he faced the square that is in front of the Water Gate from daybreak until noon in the presence of the men and the women and others who could understand. All the people listened to the scroll of the Law...

<sup>5</sup> When Ezra opened the book, all the people could see him, because he was standing higher than all the other people were. When he opened it, all the people stood. <sup>6</sup> Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen! Amen!" as they raised their hands. Then they bowed down with their faces to the ground and worshipped the LORD...

<sup>8</sup> They read the scroll of the Law of God clearly, giving the meaning, and so the people understood what was being read. <sup>9</sup> Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra, the priest and scribe, and the Levites, who were instructing the people, told all the people: "This day is holy to the LORD, your God. Do not mourn and do not weep!"

For all the people were weeping while they were listening to the Words of the Law. <sup>10</sup> Then Nehemiah told them: "Go, eat fat meat, drink sweet drinks and send portions of food to anyone who has nothing prepared! For this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be distressed! For the joy that you have in the LORD is your fortress."

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

<sup>12</sup> For, as the body is one and yet has many members and as all the members of the body are one body, although they are many, so also is Christ. <sup>13</sup> For by one Spirit we have all been baptised into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and have all been made to drink of that one Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> For indeed the body is not one member but many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it does not for that reason cease to belong to the body. <sup>16</sup> If the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it does not for that reason cease to belong to the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense

of smell be? <sup>18</sup> However, now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He has wished. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many members but one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you," or again the head to the feet, "I do not need you." <sup>22</sup> No, much rather, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are necessary. <sup>23</sup> We bestow greater honour on those members of the body that we think are less honourable, and our unpresentable members have greater modesty, <sup>24</sup> which our presentable parts do not need. However, God has composed the body and given greater honour to the member that lacks it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same concern for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all the other members suffer with it; or, if one member is honoured, all the other members rejoice with it. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and members individually. <sup>28</sup> God has appointed in the church first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then charismatic gifts of healing, helpful deeds, positions of administration and different kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? Not all are teachers, are they? Not all work miracles, do they? <sup>30</sup> Not all have charismatic gifts of healing, do they? Not all speak in tongues, do they? Not all interpret, do they? <sup>31</sup> Eagerly desire the greater gifts!

Luke 4:16-30

<sup>16</sup> Then Jesus went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. On the Sabbath He went into the synagogue, as His custom was, and stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> He was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, He found the place where Scripture had said: <sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me because He has anointed Me to tell the Good News to poor people. He has sent Me to announce freedom to prisoners and restoration of sight to blind people, to set free those who have been oppressed, <sup>19</sup> and to announce the acceptable year of the Lord."

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