

In Luke 4, which we read this morning, it is recorded that after the Lord Jesus overcame Satan's temptations during His forty days and nights in the wilderness, He returned to His hometown of Galilee and began His public ministry—the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom of God. Galilee in Jesus' time was a rich region, yielding various fruits like olives, grapes, figs, and pomegranates, thanks to its warm climate, well-developed irrigation systems, and fertile soil. According to the historian Josephus, Galilee's population at that time greatly exceeded one million. Incidentally, I heard that the population of my home prefecture, Kagawa, fell below one million last year, dropping to around 900,000. Furthermore, Galilee was slightly smaller in area than Kagawa Prefecture, about 60% of its size. This means Galilee at that time had a considerably high population density. The synagogue built in Nazareth, one of Galilee's towns, is the setting for today's story. As you know, Nazareth was the town where Jesus' family lived, the place where his family home was. The Lord Jesus initially based his preaching of the gospel of the kingdom of God in Jewish synagogues. However, as we see in today's passage, his words of preaching provoked opposition from the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Therefore, He ceased preaching in the synagogue and instead traveled around, preaching the coming of the kingdom of God to the people in a form of itinerant ministry.

Here, let us briefly introduce the Jewish synagogue of that time. Jewish synagogues were built in towns and villages where Jews lived as places to worship on the Sabbath. It seems to have been the rule that at least one synagogue was built wherever ten households gathered. Since Nazareth was a populous town, its synagogue was likely large. Most synagogues of that time were built of stone. The main entrance faced south, so worshipers could face Jerusalem during prayer. Upon entering, the congregation did not sit with their backs to the entrance but turned to face it, meaning they prayed facing south. At the front center of the synagogue stood a table where scrolls of Scripture written on parchment were stored in cylindrical tubes. Several large scrolls, like rolls of cake, contained the Torah (the books of the Law) and the Prophets like Isaiah. The Scripture containing the word to be proclaimed that day was read aloud by several members of the congregation. The Sabbath worship service was broadly structured in three parts. First, prayer; second, scripture reading; and third, the sermon on the word. The second part, scripture reading, was often read with a melody. Eventually, the reading of psalms became established as part of the worship order, and it is said this developed into hymns.

Jewish synagogues did not have professional preachers like today's church pastors. As mentioned in the weekly bulletin, lay leaders called synagogue officers prepared the worship service, arranged for the preacher, and also handled the maintenance and management of the synagogue. Reading today's passage, we see that Jesus was invited as the preacher for that day's worship. Verses 14 and following immediately preceding this passage state that Jesus was known among the people around Galilee, and his reputation had spread throughout the region. Being a local and also a synagogue official, he was likely an easy choice to invite. The Scriptures in Jesus' time were, of course, the Old Testament. (The New Testament is a collection of writings compiled by the disciples after Jesus' death.) These Scriptures were also placed on the lectern in the synagogue at Nazareth.

On this day, the Scripture passage Jesus sought to explain was from the Book of Isaiah. It was the word from Isaiah chapter 61: "[The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.](#)" The author of this prophetic book, also known as Third Isaiah, foretold that the Lord God would bring about the liberation of the people of Israel from the Babylonian captivity, healing their bodies and restoring their souls. Jesus read this passage. Then he declared, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Those who heard were astonished. They had known Jesus since childhood. They had seen him up close, the son of a poor carpenter, helping his father and supporting the household. Yet now this Jesus

declared, "This Scripture from Isaiah has been fulfilled in your hearing today." Where on earth had he learned such things? They were even more astonished when Jesus himself said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," and declared, "I have come to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." The Jews were currently under Roman rule. They were eagerly awaiting a Messiah who would liberate them from Roman domination. Isaiah had prophesied the coming of such a Messiah. Yet, Jesus declared that he himself was that Messiah who would bring about the Kingdom of God. This was a great surprise. For while Jesus healed people's illnesses, he did not engage in anti-Roman movements. "Where is this liberation?" they must have thought. Yet, just as in our own time, changing the political system does not bring the kingdom of God. We demand that those in power solve various political problems, economic issues, and wars. But we refuse to acknowledge that the root cause of these problems lies in the sin within us. People fail to see that unless they are saved from sin, they are not truly saved. Even if immediate problems are solved, new ones inevitably arise. Conversely, when a person's sins are forgiven, they are liberated from them, and their life is transformed to center on God. Even if nothing around them changes, that person becomes free. Jesus' cross points the way for humanity to be liberated from sin, to forgive one another, and to love one another. How can one live peacefully with neighbors when there is no peace within the heart? The gospel Jesus preached was the beginning of God's salvation, loving and accepting all people in the depths of their being.

Another thing Jesus said that angered the worshipers was His explicit teaching on the salvation of Gentiles. Two Old Testament examples are cited. The first was during the time of the prophet Elijah, when the people of Israel suffered famine, and Elijah was sent to a widow in Zarephath of Sidon. There, Elijah performed the miraculous act of raising the widow's dead son back to life. The second example was from the time of Elisha, Elijah's disciple, when Naaman, a Syrian commander, was healed. Jesus pointed out that while many people in Israel suffered from severe skin diseases at that time, only this foreigner was healed. The Jews believed only they were worthy to be called God's people. Yet Jesus cited these two examples to teach that God's salvation is open to the Gentiles as well. Moreover, the Gentiles who sought God's salvation were saved, while the Jews who refused to hear God's word were not. You too must not rest complacently on the faith of God's election. Receiving God's salvation depends on whether one seeks Him. Jesus declared that even an Israelite would not be saved without seeking God, and in such cases, salvation would be transferred to the Gentiles.

Hearing Jesus' sermon—which wounded their pride as the chosen people and not only equated Himself with Elijah and Elisha but openly declared Himself a prophet sent by God—the people of Nazareth were furious. The crowd rose up, drove Jesus out of the town, and tried to throw him off a cliff, as verse 29 later states. But Jesus slipped through the crowd and left. After this, Jesus never entered the synagogue in Nazareth again. What is the most important thing for us? Is it not our own life? Even if a person gains the whole world, if they lose their own life, it means nothing. Death is the end. Yet the Lord Jesus tells us to seek what does not perish even in death. That is eternal life. Being Jewish does not guarantee that life, that salvation. Winning the world's competitions, gaining status or honor, does not guarantee that life, that salvation either. Rather, it is obeying God's word, the source of life. It is seeking God.

In the life of faith, there is no graduation. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul says, "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect." He says he thinks only of one thing: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead, he presses on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called him heavenward in Christ Jesus. Otherwise, he says, while preaching to others, he himself might become disqualified. We are the same. Without resting on God's election, we desire to run the marathon of faith in this world until the Lord comes, and to obtain the crown of life. A new year begins in April. We pray wholeheartedly that the year 2026 will also be a year of the Lord's grace.

We pray.