

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Tempe, Arizona  
The third Sunday after Epiphany  
January 26, 2025  
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft

<sup>16</sup>He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. <sup>17</sup>The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: <sup>18</sup>The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, <sup>19</sup>and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. <sup>20</sup>He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. <sup>21</sup>He began to tell them, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup>They all spoke well of him and were impressed by the words of grace that came from his mouth. And they kept saying, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" <sup>23</sup>He told them, "Certainly you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' Do here in your hometown everything we heard you did in Capernaum." <sup>24</sup>And he said, "Amen I tell you: No prophet is accepted in his hometown. <sup>25</sup>But truly I tell you: There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three years and six months, while a great famine came over all the land. <sup>26</sup>Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow of Zarephath, in Sidon. <sup>27</sup>And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was healed except Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup>All those who were in the synagogue were filled with rage when they heard these things. <sup>29</sup>They got up and drove him out of the town. They led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup>But he passed through the middle of them and went on his way. — Luke 4:16-30 EHV

Amidst a discussion with a co-worker, he says, "I wouldn't die on that hill." What does that phrase, or its variations "Are you willing to die on that hill?" and "**This is not the hill to die on.**" mean? The imagery comes from the concept of a soldier's strategy. The soldier needs to determine if capturing a certain hill would be worth the potential of losing his life. Sometimes, the position's value in battle would be worth the potential loss. Other times, it would not.

Have you ever received such advice? **This is not the hill to die on.** Maybe it was in a point that you were making to your child. Maybe it was an incident at work. Maybe it was in an altercation with your neighbor. You are encouraged that you should not make a mountain out of a molehill. **This is not the hill to die on.**

Sometimes, however, the issue really is that pressing. Sometimes, this is the hill to die on. In today's reading we see a situation in Jesus' life in which a question would be asked, is this the hill to die on? In one sense, the answer is yes. In another sense, the answer is no. Let's consider this concept as we walk through today's gospel.

Today, we return with Jesus to his hometown of Nazareth. We know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. His parents had to go there because of the census. Some time in his young childhood, after returning from Egypt because of the need to flee from Herod's wrath, Jesus and his family settled back down in Nazareth.

Jesus' custom was to attend worship at the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. This was a place that Jesus had likely been to for worship at least a thousand times. The worship custom at the synagogue would be fairly similar to what we see at our church. They would start with a recitation of what is called the Shema. "Hear O, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4) They would establish their liturgy in who God is. Then they would pray to God. After their prayers, they would have two readings from the

Scriptures. They would read from the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible, Then they would read from one of the books of the prophets.

A difference between our worship and that of the synagogue is that their rabbis or teachers were independent of the synagogue. The synagogue didn't have a resident teacher similar to our pastors. Instead, they would invite rabbis to come and share a reading and teaching based on it. On this Sabbath, the traveling rabbi that was invited was Jesus.

Jesus' approach to delivering his message was like the other rabbis in many ways. He read from the Scriptures the text that was given. He did this while standing as was customary for the teacher. Then he sat down to deliver his message as was also the traditional approach. Jesus' delivery of the message was ordinary.

Jesus' teaching, however, was not ordinary. People remarked at his gracious words. They were even confused. They had questioned saying "Isn't this Joseph's son?" They had seen Jesus there before. They knew Jesus. His dad was a carpenter. They were amazed at the words he spoke. Their amazement would soon change to anger though.

Jesus, who was not just the son of Mary and stepson of Joseph but also the Son of God, could see the intentions of their hearts. He then spoke a stern warning to these people in his hometown. He recognized that they did not want a message of who he was as the fulfillment of the Scripture's prophecy. They wanted Jesus to come home performing miracles and working signs.

Jesus' warning to them noted that prophets were often not accepted in their hometowns. Elijah was sent not to the widows in Israel, but to Sidon. Elisha healed not the lepers in Israel, but the Syrian man.

Recognizing that Jesus did not come home to be the miracle worker that they wanted, the people were enraged. They did not want Jesus the Christ as he had come to them. They wanted Jesus as they envisioned. They wanted a Messiah in their own making.

Seemingly escalating quickly, these people at the synagogue that day went from amazement at Jesus' words to delirium as they decided to kill him. These people drove Jesus out of the city to the brow of a hill. They had planned to throw Jesus off of the hill to kill him. This might seem crazy to us but the sinful nature is hostile to God. The sinful nature hates God. People driven by their own sinful desires would certainly desire to get rid of Jesus when they realize that he is not going to be the Messiah in their own making.

Jesus knew that the hill on which Nazareth was built **was not the hill to die on**. Jesus came to fulfill the Father's plan. He could not die there on that hill. He needed to escape this mob. Now, it seems that Jesus did perform a miracle on that Sabbath. It was not the miracle that the crowd desired though. Jesus simply passed through the midst of the crowd and went on his way. How did he do this? Did Jesus miraculously make himself untouchable and walk through the crowd? It would seem so. You see, Jesus did not come to be the Messiah in their own making. He would do miraculous signs and wonderful things but he did this according to the Father's plan, not theirs. This hill on which Nazareth was built **was not the hill to die on**.

Jesus knew which hill was the hill to die on. It was that of the Father's plan. It was that of his purpose. Jesus spoke a hard word to the Sabbath goers in Nazareth. He could have avoided the tough conversation and thought, "Oh no, this is not the hill to die on." Yet he knew it was. He knew he had to bring this tough word to the people. They needed to hear the stern law of God. They needed to know the truth of who he was. He was not simply the son of Joseph. He was not simply a miracle worker. He was the fulfillment of Scriptures' promises of a Messiah. He was the one upon whom the the Spirit of the Lord

rested. He was the one who came to proclaim the gospel of release from the prison of sin. He was the one who would give sight to the blind. He was the one who would give eternal mending to the broken. This was the hill to die on.

Jesus also knew that the hill on which Nazareth was built was not the hill that he would die on. Jesus had come not to simply perform miracles and be a great showman. Jesus didn't even come to just be a great rabbi or teacher. Jesus came to die on a hill. The gospel that he proclaimed would be fulfilled in his death. He would not die on a hill outside of Nazareth but on a hill outside of Jerusalem. There on that hill, he would die. He would die between two criminals while hung on a cross. He would do this to take away the sins of the whole world. Therefore, this hill on which Nazareth was built **was not the hill to die on.**

Jesus faced rejection. Jesus faced suffering. This is because Jesus stood on the truth of his mission. He had come to be the Savior of the world. His gospel too was the hill to die on.

In the second lesson from today's service, Peter and John recognized the truth about rejection. God foretold that his anointed one, Jesus, would be rejected by men. Jesus was rejected by men as he was put to death by the religious and political elites. Therefore, as followers of Jesus, they knew that they too would face rejection. Yet, the truth of salvation in Christ alone was a hill that they were willing to die on. Therefore, they continued in their mission of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to those who needed to hear it.

Brothers and sisters, when it comes to the truth of God's saving Word, do you see this as a hill that you are willing to die upon? Think about it for a moment. Is this hill worth dying on? Most of us will not face a situation where someone would ask you to renounce your faith or be put to death. However, every single day you face scenarios in which you need to decide if this hill is worth dying on. When your boyfriend pressures you to commit immoral and indecent acts with him, will you die on the hill of the truth of God's Word? When your employer wants you to affirm worldly and sinful agendas, will you die on the hill of the truth of God's Word? When online friends try to persuade you into thinking that believing there is only one way to heaven is closed-minded, will you die on the hill of the truth of God's Word?

Sadly, we all too often are not willing to die on the hill. Not only do we fail to see that all of God's Word is important and necessary to stand upon, but we are even willing to concede for the least of pressures. **This is not the hill to die on**, the kids have had a long week and need to sleep in this Sunday. We will skip Sunday School and go to the late service. **This is not the hill to die on**, he loves me and we will get married someday anyway. **This is not the hill to die on**, as long as I personally believe in Jesus I will be okay. I don't need to force my beliefs on others.

When we fail to stand on the hill of the truth of God's Word, this is cowardice. God has called us to be his people, his partners. Yet, we fail to do so when we face the slightest pressure in this life. This cowardice to stand on God's Word at all times is sin. Confess your sin to the Lord.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) Brothers and sisters, Jesus looked at you and your need of salvation and said, "I will die on this hill." Jesus was not cowardly like us. Instead, Jesus went forward to face immense persecution and suffering. He did this for you. Then Jesus resolutely went to the hill of Golgatha to die for you. When Jesus died on that hill, he washed away all your sins. He even washed away your cowardly actions. Jesus did all this so that you would not die on a hill, but live on a great and high mountain forever, which is the New Jerusalem.

Maybe certain points in this world are not hills to die on. The Word of our Lord is. Our God calls us to courageously stand for the truth of his Word. When we fail to, we can find solace in the fact that Jesus looked at his mission as a hill worth dying on. Then, he went to die on the hill of Golgotha to forgive all your sins. Now, let us ask ourselves, is this hill worth dying on? Amen.