

A Sermon by Mr. Jonathan Pucick, Seminarian  
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (C)  
Sunday, February 3, 2019

*Jeremiah 1:4-10 | Psalm 71:1-6  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13 | Luke 4:21-30*

*In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 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?"*

*He said to them "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.'" And he said, "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." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the 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.*

So there's this comic by an artist named Will Varner—and I don't have a way to show it you, but indulge me, and then you go look up on the internet later. The first frame shows two parents affectionately laughing at their toddler-aged daughter on the floor who has apparently stuck a bean up her nose. The quote bubble above the mother states, "Ha! She stuck a bean in her nose!" Bear with me. The next frame shows this daughter growing up, I mean just blossoming into this spectacular, successful human being, she's graduating with honors, she's in a laboratory holding a beaker making some cutting edge scientific discovery, she's making an acceptance speech at a prestigious awards ceremony, she's even in a spacesuit with a jet-pack diving headlong into some new planet's atmosphere. Don't ask me how; it's a comic. She's come a long way. So the third frame shows this woman with her parents again, now further along in their years. They're at a small gathering introducing her to this handsome man, and her father says with pride, "Meet our daughter! One time she stuck a bean in her nose!" The man makes this slight smirk, and at this point the daughter is so flustered with embarrassment that's she's red in the face. Her mother with her hand affectionately patting her daughter's back states, "It was a lima bean." The final frame has three simple words, "Parents never forget."

I'm not sure if Jesus ever stuck a bean up his nose, but I think he can empathize with the frustration of this poor woman when he states, "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." After all he has proclaimed to this synagogue in Nazareth, the question from within the crowd still arises, "Is not this Joseph's son?" You can almost imagine the older folks coming up to Jesus to squeeze his cheeks and say, "I remember you when you were just 6 years old." Or one of his childhood friends elbowing him to say, "Oh, those were the days!" Nazareth never forgets.

Familiarity isn't bad in and of itself, but there is a certain kind of familiarity that does breed contempt. By recognizing Jesus as simply Joseph's son, the crowd is all too interested in keeping Jesus inside their

own expectations, reinforcing who they think Jesus is rather than listening to the prophetic announcements of hope pouring forth from the son of God.

If you'll recall in last week's gospel, Jesus reads in the synagogue from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He then goes on to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." From Isaiah's prophetic vision, Jesus is announcing a new era, a new work of God in the world, and Jesus identifies himself as the one anointed by the Spirit to bring about this good news.

According to Luke's account in the story, Jesus is still in the safe zone, preaching and teaching from the scrolls. Sure he was a little bit edgier than the usual rabbi, though nothing too unsettling or controversial. And the reminder that this is only the son of Joseph rings loudly in their ears, rendering the prophetic vision of Jesus innocuous. But Jesus doesn't hold back and he doesn't let up. He seems to know that it's not just himself whom the crowds have rendered innocuous by repeated exposure.

To show this, he recalls two familiar stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. In these stories, God sends prophets to come to the aid of two people in need. This would have been just fine except that these two people were Gentiles. They didn't fall within the boundaries of the covenant and were not entitled to God's favor "...there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah," Jesus says, "yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath." Likewise, "There were also many lepers...in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." While so familiar to the people of Nazareth, hearing these stories are a reminder that God helps those outside of the covenant, not only those who belong to a particular religious tradition, ethnic affiliation, or national identity. This unsettles and offends the people so greatly that they whip themselves into a fit of rage, driving Jesus, the son of Joseph, out of town and attempting to hurl him off a cliff. Indeed, no prophet is accepted in their hometown.

As I read this story, I can't help but think of the ways in which I can drive controversial Jesus out of town and off a cliff. In my quest for solace and assurance, I wonder about the ways in which I, too, have become all too familiar with who I think Jesus is and my understanding of the scriptures conveniently tailored to my own interests and desires, of course. And if I'm honest, there's a certain amount of familiarity in church that is attractive to me. I'm comfortable with that which is predictable. I sit in the same pew, sing the same music, drink the same coffee, and talk to mostly the same people. I know a lot of the readings and could probably participate in the Sunday liturgy with my eyes closed, and I like that. After all, the best way to get to know God is to make yourself familiar with the things of God. Repetition is a wonderful instrument of prayer and worship, and it is not one I want to throw out.

But if comfort becomes in and of itself the end goal in the search for God, I fear something is lost. If I glaze over the reading of scripture without letting it change me, if I say the words of a prayer by habit rather than from the heart, I risk taking the life of Christian discipleship for a set of practices on Sunday rather than living into the vision of the Kingdom of God enacted on earth as in heaven, and it's easy to forget how radical this vision is. You see, our reading today in Luke is placed at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. For Luke, this prophetic vision of Isaiah is Jesus' mission statement, "Good news to the poor. Release to the captives. Recovery of sight to the blind. Freedom from oppression." This is the ministry of Christ, the ministry to which we are also called. Christianity is a revolutionary way of being in the world, and not a comfortable one.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “*I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.*”

This passage rings loud and clear in light of today’s gospel. For Luke, if we are truly wanting to follow Jesus, we are to deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, and follow him. As disciples, we are not entitled to that which is comfortable or familiar. But here’s the good news presented by Jesus: God is bigger than our ideas of who God is. God’s love and aid extends far and wide, to those we least expect, regardless of whether or not they think like, look like, or act like us.

There’s another line of writing from C.S. Lewis, in his *Chronicles of Narnia* series, a Christian allegory set in fantasy. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Susan talks with Mr. Beaver about Aslan, the allegorical Christ-character.

“Aslan is a lion,” Mr. Beaver says, “the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion...”

“Safe?” said Mr Beaver “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

May you remember the unsettling love of our God. May that hold you as comfort today.