

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-30

4th Sunday After Epiphany, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 30, 2022

Rejection at Nazareth

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson for this Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear God's call to Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations. Despite his doubts, the young boy is reassured that he can answer the divine call. Listen to these words from Jeremiah 1:4-10...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

The scene in our Gospel Lesson today continues last week's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth. But words of praise for Joseph's son will turn right away to words of rage. Listen to these verses found in Luke 4:21-30...

Sermon

As early as the fourth century, Epiphany has been the festival commemorating the visit of the Wise Men from the East to the baby Jesus. Thus, we are celebrating the revealing of Christ to the Gentile world. The dictionary, however, adds further dimension to the word:

“Epiphany...a sudden, intuitive perception...into the reality or essential meaning of something.”

Jeremiah had an epiphany wherein God called him to be a prophet. Over against protests that he was only a boy, God assured him that he could be the prophet he was calling him to be.

True to the literary definition of an epiphany, Jesus brought perception “into the reality or essential meaning of something.” He stripped away the superficial from life and the artificial from religion. What you need, he told Nicodemus, is a new birth—not just a resolution. To the woman of Samaria he prescribed his water, which would satisfy a deep, eternal thirst. To the rich, chief tax collector. To Zacchaeus he revealed, that his grasping values were wrong; so

Zacchaeus gave graciously to the poor and righted his monetary wrongs. For the Rich Young Ruler he commanded a whole new set of values—a change which sadly the man was unwilling to make. But when he pointed out the hypocrisies of the scribes and the Pharisees, they began seeking ways to destroy him. So an epiphany can be exciting and indeed transforming, but it can also be upsetting and result in a digging in of the heels.

Such is the story in our lesson today. It is the continuation of the account of last Sunday's story of Jesus' visit to his hometown of Nazareth. He went to the synagogue, as was his custom, and he read that magnificent prophecy of Isaiah about a Servant who would proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, uplift the exploited, and proclaim God's grace. Then Jesus announced that the Scripture was being fulfilled that very day in the synagogue.

Well, the immediate response was one of amazement and approval. They spoke well of him, because his words were gracious. "How right he is!" "What a blessing to have this native son making good!" The people sensed the wondrous hope that he embodied.

Yes, the people were just delighted. "Isn't this the son of Joseph and Mary? We know them well. What a blessing! What an honor! How greatly our community will benefit!"

But there is a dark side of Epiphany and we see it revealed in our scripture from Luke. Jesus could sense it and so he said to them:

Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" (Lk. 4:23)

For they had already begun to murmur in their hearts. In the gathering places, in the kitchens, in the workshops—there was gossip about this native son.

He could work miracles. OK. But why had he blessed that wedding with wine? In Cana, of all places? Why those healings in that far-off harbor of Capernaum? What about the sick on the street where he lived? He needs to get himself straightened out. He should heal himself. Then he would put first things first. Then he would take care of us and forget about all those foreigners.

Perhaps if Jesus had stopped by merely pointing out that a prophet was not without honor, save in his own country, the people might grudgingly have admitted that it was difficult for them to see him as a prophet. But Jesus went on and reminded them that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's day, but God sent Elijah to bring relief to a foreigner, a widow in Sidon.

Well, that stunned their pride and their sense of chosenness. Then Jesus underlined the point by recalling that in the days of Elisha there were many who suffered from leprosy, but the one who was healed was Naaman, a Syrian.

We can imagine how they reacted to that. "How dare this carpenter's son tell us that God chooses to bless Gentiles? Who gave him the authority to instruct and even to insult us?"

The people were so angry that they dragged him outside the city, to the precipice bordering their town, intending to throw him over the cliff. But, says Luke, he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

It was a strange, horrendous development. After first being impressed with the graciousness of his words, the words about the Sidonian widow and the Syrian leper were not heard as gracious. It was as if the people of Nazareth said, "If you don't want us exclusively, forget it." This was just the first of many rejections of Jesus by his own people.

For Jesus casts himself here in a different role than the miracle worker about whom they had heard. He takes to himself the identity of a prophet. And prophets had the reputation of bringing a message that confronted people with things they had rather not hear. Jesus would not be the first or the last prophet told to leave town because he spoke words that challenged.

We today can make the same mistake as the townsfolk of Nazareth if we will not pay heed to someone who might bring us closer to God, just because they are so familiar, and we do not have the humility to listen. It may be *God* speaking through the voice of a mother or father, or a son or daughter, or a brother or sister. It may be *God* speaking through the voice of a husband or wife or friend. It may be *God* speaking through the voice of a familiar preacher or teacher. Yet we may have ears that will not hear.

Many people prefer a Jesus they can come to in times of trouble, who just tends to their needs. But he is also King of kings and Lord of lords; and, as such, he is Lord of all of life—including what we do with our time, talent, and treasure. He is Lord of our relationships, our values, our goals. And it is the Lordship of Christ that becomes difficult. We too can be tempted, in our own fashion, to follow the people of Nazareth in trying to push him over the cliff.

The Hymnal contains a variety of hymns which plead for an epiphany—a moment of revelation: “Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of My Heart,” “Open My Eyes That I May See, glimpses of truth Thou hast for me.”

But how ready are we for such glimpses of truth? For often the revelation begins with new insight into ourselves; and that “revealing” can be a painful thing. The people of Nazareth managed pretty well with Jesus’ revealing reading from Isaiah and applying it to himself in their hearing that Sabbath day in the synagogue. They found his words gracious. It was when he

began to challenge their view of God's mission that they got upset. His suggestion that they were like their ancestors in Elijah and Elisha's day—who had to see God's blessing reach out to outsiders—this was simply unacceptable. They were like Jonah of old, who would rather die than see God's mercy and grace extended to the wicked people of Nineveh.

These Jewish people should have remembered that the commission given to father Abraham was to be a blessing to the world. That Isaiah had spoken of Israel being a light to the nations. Had they humbly accepted Jesus' truth and sought deliverance from the blindness and pride which consumed them, they might have created the setting for even greater manifestations of the glory of God. Instead, there were virtually no miracles there—because of their unbelief. What a missed opportunity there was that day in Nazareth.

The whole encounter makes me think of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Remember her in her backyard in Kansas, singing “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” longing to fly beyond the ordinary, the obvious, the dimness of her own surroundings. Her fellow Kansans tell her to get her head out of the clouds and focus on the here and now, where work needs to be done and storms threaten to rage.

When Dorothy and little Toto are blown out of Kansas and into the land of Oz, her dream is fulfilled as her black-and -white world suddenly becomes illuminated with brilliant color. There's a good witch and a bad witch; munchkins and flying monkeys; a scarecrow who needs a brain, a tin man who needs a heart, and a lion who needs courage; and a wizard who is revealed to be an imposter. When Dorothy finally wakes up back in her black-and white-home in Kansas, she tells her disbelieving friends and family of the wondrous sights she's seen “out there.” But the great realization is that all that glory was right there in Kansas the whole time—she just couldn't see it. “There's no place like home!”

Jesus' revelation that the good news is for the whole world, not just those of us who have come to know Jesus, shouldn't offend us or make us want to run Jesus off a cliff. It's not a threat but an invitation. Jesus is indeed bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, all of this, today in our midst—and we can be a part of it, spreading his good news here in the Midway community, and all over the world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.