

Epiphany 4, Yr C, 020313  
All Saints Episcopal Church

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

Here's a little something you might not know: a lot of ministers have a difficult time preaching in the congregations where they grew up.

It was true for me. I was invited to preach in the church where I grew up during the summer after only my first year in seminary. I had mixed feelings about it – scared to death and excited. I realized that I was going to be standing in front of people I had known since I was 11, and worse, in front of people who had known ME since I was 11: a one-time boyfriend, people I had babysat for, my 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher (who I hoped didn't remember how much I didn't like her), and a host of adults I looked up to as a kid. How in the world would I stand up as an adult of 23 in front of all these people and expect them to listen to what I had to say? Even the newcomers who joined while I was in college had been 'indoctrinated.' My family was still there, and that became the filter through which they heard the content of my sermon. Before they heard me speak a word, they already knew me.

So I can understand something of what is going on as Jesus returns home in this passage from the fourth chapter of Luke. He goes to Nazareth, his hometown, and attends a service at his hometown synagogue. No sooner does he read the Scriptures than murmurs start buzzing. "Isn't this Joseph's son? We know him. We like him. We expect him to be gracious and well-spoken."

Yes, it is difficult for a preacher to go back home. Everybody knows you. And that is the problem. That is probably one reason that this saying is one that is repeated in all 3 Synoptic Gospels: that a prophet gets no respect in a prophet's hometown. Or to put it another way, *you become an expert only after you move more than ten miles away from home.*

Now I'm not saying that my experience was the same as the one Jesus has in today's story. But at a far deeper level, that's what happened in Nazareth that day. Jesus strolls into his hometown. And yes, everybody knew him. He gets up, takes out the scroll of Isaiah, finds his place, and reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me to bring good news." And everybody nods and says, "That's right! Preach it, brother!"

Then Jesus tells them two more stories out of their own Bible, a story about Elijah and a story about Elisha, stories that his listeners already knew. Suddenly the crowd begins to grumble and to curse him, and tries to hurl him over a cliff! The people who know him the best want to murder him!

No doubt, when the writer of the Gospel of Luke thinks about Jesus, he has the ancient prophets in mind, those gruff and unruly people who got up and spoke a Word from God. Luke is well aware that Jesus stands at the end of a long line of prophetic succession. And for him, that's the root of all the trouble.

According to the whole story of Jesus as Luke tells it, some friends feared for Jesus' safety. In chapter 13, they warn him, "Stay away from the Holy City. Your life is in danger." But Jesus replies to them: "I must go to Jerusalem, because that's the city that always kills the prophets." And so his whole story is about working his way there,

Not long after that, Jesus comes around the bend on Palm Sunday. He sees the city, stops dead in his tracks, and begins to weep. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem! If only you knew the things that make for peace. Instead you are too busy murdering the prophets."

Even on Easter, the news comes out that Jesus has risen; but his own disciples don't believe it. Jesus joins two of them on the road to Emmaus, but they do not recognize them. So as they walk, Jesus interprets the Bible. He reminds them of what the Good Book says. And it fills his disciples with heartburn.

Luke wants us to know from his Gospel that the most scandalous thing we can ever do is to hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people. The most outrageous thing we can do is to take the Bible seriously, not only as a comforting word, but as a deeply disturbing word as well. And the main reason why it is so disturbing is that it reminds us that God does not play by our rules or stick to our boundaries.

Does anyone here remember hearing about Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farm in Georgia back in the 1950's and 60's? From an early age the young Jordan was troubled by the racial and economic injustice that he perceived in his community. Hoping to improve the lot of sharecroppers through scientific farming techniques, he enrolled in the University of Georgia, earning a degree

in agriculture in 1933. During his college years, however, Jordan became convinced that the roots of poverty were spiritual as well as economic. This conviction led him to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, from which he earned a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament in 1938.

After that, he and some friends started a peanut farm near Americus, GA and tried to run it the same way he thought Jesus would run it. It was an interracial, Christian community. He named the farm *Koinonia*, after the Greek word for *communion* or *fellowship*. He believed in a good wage for an honest day's work. He believed in taking care of the land and those who work it. And he believed that all people -- black and white -- could work together and stand together. Later, he was instrumental in helping to start Habitat for Humanity.

But the farm was begun in the early 1950s, and his local Baptist church did not agree with his thoughts on racial equality.

One time, an agricultural student from Florida State visited Koinonia Farm for the weekend. This student was from India, and said, "I've never gone to a Christian worship service. I would like to go." So Clarence took him to Rehoboth Baptist Church. It didn't matter to Clarence that he was from India. But he had dark skin, and so he did not fit in.

After church, the pastor drove out to Jordan's farm and said, "You can't come with somebody like that. It causes disunity in our church." Jordan tried to explain, but the pastor wasn't listening.

Sometime later, a group of church leaders went out to the farm to plead with Clarence to keep 'undesirable' people out of their church. As the story goes, Clarence promised to apologize in front of the congregation if somebody could prove he had done something wrong. Then he handed a Bible to a man in the group and said, "Can you tell me what sin I have committed by bringing a stranger to church?"

The man slammed down the book and said, "Don't give me any of this Bible stuff!"

Clarence retorted, "I'm not giving you any Bible stuff. I'm asking you to give it to me."

The man and the rest of the group did not know what to say; so they slipped out. When they got back to the church, they wrote a letter and said, "Mr. Jordan, you are no longer welcome in our church, because you keep bringing in the wrong kind of people."

Jesus was not acceptable in his own country because his mission extended beyond his own country. Israel was called to be a light to the nations, a beacon of God's mercy for all people everywhere. When God's light began to shine in Jesus of Nazareth, it exposed dark corners everywhere, even in Israel. Some of the people slithered out of those dark places and tried to snuff out the light.

It is much more comforting to believe that you have learned all you need to learn, to affirm that the way you have always done it before is the only way to keep on doing it; that is a satisfying way to make it through the turbulence of change. Just hang on tight for a while and things will blow over. It works fairly well, until you realize that the way you always did it before may not have been the best way it could have been done.

That's what happened in the synagogue in Nazareth. What Jesus said started out sounding so familiar and comforting. And then Jesus raised a question: "How far is God's reach?" It was, and still is, a troubling issue. To think that the reach of God might far extend our own! To consider that the kind of people with whom God might choose to associate is different from who we are. That is disturbing, indeed.

Jesus looked at his congregation and said, "Let me tell you a Bible story. Remember Elijah? He was the greatest of all our prophets. And there was a famine in the land of Israel for three years and six months. Crops withered. The soil cracked. Not a drop of rain for years. And there were a lot of widows in the land of Israel in the time of Elijah. But remember where he went? God sent Elijah to a Gentile woman in Sidon."

"Let me tell you another story," Jesus said. "Remember Elisha? He followed Elijah, and whatever spirit Elijah had, Elisha was given even more of it. He was a powerful man. And in his time, there were many people with leprosy in the land of Israel. They were sick and covered with sores. But Elisha didn't heal any of them. Instead he was sent to Na'aman, a Gentile army commander in Syria. And he healed that Gentile; but he didn't heal any of the Jews."

When the Jewish people heard this, they were absolutely furious. Suddenly they understood what it was Jesus was really saying to them. He was proclaiming the disturbing -- but Good with a capital 'G' -- news that God loves everybody, particularly those beyond their tight, exclusive circle. It was, and is, a scandalous thing to say.

The only thing more scandalous is to remember how that is just the sort of thing that God wants us to say...and do.