

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, NM 87107
Sunday Feb. 3, 2019 Epiphany 4C
Text: Luke 4;1-21 (14-21)
Theme: Are Sermons Supposed to Make You Angry?

A friend of mine told me a story once about a retreat she had attended. The opening community-building question was a good one, "Tell a story about someone who has been Christ for you in your life."

One woman spoke of how a friend and mentor had literally kept her together through a shattering divorce. Another woman talked of losing a child and the community of women that had come around her in the depth of her grief and dared to listen to her and just be with her even when she was not very good company. Another person talked of how her friend had walked beside her through a long illness and recovery while almost everyone else had deserted her. One younger woman told a heart-warming story of a surrogate dad, a neighbor who became a father figure for her when her own father self-destructed and then disappeared. These were absolutely beautiful stores of love, comfort, compassion, rescue, literally stories of salvation.

For my friend the stories were very moving, the group became a community through those stories, it was church in a different key, a more interactive, familiar and vulnerable church than she was used to but nonetheless attractive and warm. And then a woman stood up and broke the spell so to speak, she said, "Well the first thing I thought about when I heard the question of who had been Christ in my life, was "Who in my life told me the honest to goodness truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?"

It was a startling thing to say in the midst of so much warmth and good feeling. For some it was quite upsetting but at the same time, the woman had interjected something crucial into the conversation. It is true that Christ is the one who comforts us, binds up our wounds and at times rescues us. However, Christ is also the one who wakes us up and tells us the unsettling truth about ourselves in a way that we might be surprised to what lengths we would go to shut him up. Consider the crowd in today's Gospel reading.

Jesus has returned to Nazareth and made his way to the synagogue. The hometown boy who's done well has come home to preach. Luke says his fame has spread throughout the countryside, so they turn out to hear him preach—this favorite son.

Jesus stands up to read. As he ascends the steps, the attendant hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

We're not told whether the Isaiah scroll was handed to Jesus by prearrangement or by providence. Jesus carefully finds this passage: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

When Jesus is done reading, he sits down to preach, following the established custom of the synagogue. And that is when the trouble really starts. With the eyes of a familiar crowd on him, Jesus offers his first sermon. The first word out of his mouth is "Today." Today the hopes contained in this passage are realized in your hearing. Today he has come to release and restore, to reach and redeem.

Jesus has them eating out of his hand. He is the hometown boy who reads so well. What wonderful words! And all might have gone well . . . if Jesus had not preached. But Jesus expounds on the reading, "Isaiah said that God is coming to deliver the faithful. I say that that day of the Lord's advent is now. The people become agitated and begin to question Jesus' qualifications. "Isn't this the carpenter's Son?" "Who does he think he is making such bold statements about our tradition, that's not what the other rabbi's say."

Jesus' response is swift and hard-hitting. He begins to recount to them, stories of God's saving action in their own tradition. But they are uncomfortable stories because they tell of God coming to the unexpected, to outsiders, to Gentiles and women.

When was the last time God came to us? During the time of the great prophet Elijah, there were many famished Jewish women when there was a great food shortage in the land. It is interesting to find that God's prophet gave food to none of those hungry Jewish women but only to a Gentile woman." You can almost feel the adoring, hometown crowd getting silent and beginning to glare at him with disapproval.

Jesus, the preacher, continues, "And there had to be lots of people suffering from various illnesses during the time of the prophet Elisha, but God's prophet healed none of them. Only one, a Syrian army officer, was healed."

"When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was 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" (Luke 4:20).

Now I have had some pretty negative reactions and nasty emails in response to some sermons over the years, but no one has ever threatened to murder me because of my preaching.

I wonder what it is that you expect from a sermon? Over the years I've tried to ask this question of people. Here are some of the answers: I want to understand the

scriptures in a new way, sometimes I find the bible so confusing, I want a sermon that reminds me of what we believe and encourages me to live it out. I hope the sermon will give me some real life application for my faith, I hope that a sermon gives me one important idea to ponder throughout the week, I want to be lifted out of my negativity and reminded of God's presence and work in the world.

I actually think that all of these answers are pretty good though the expectations seem daunting for preachers. As we look at the passage of Jesus' first sermon today, I'm wondering if our ideas of a good sermon will line up with what Jesus offered?

Why do you think that the congregation at Nazareth got so upset at Jesus' first sermon?

Put yourself in their place. Here we are, God's people, recipients of the promises of God to be with us and to deliver us. And yet, for centuries, we have been the victims of the cruelty of other nations. Even now, the Roman Empire has its heel upon our necks. When is God going to make good on God's promises and come for us? After all, we are God's chosen people, God's beloved.

The preacher says the day of deliverance is now. And we like the sound of that. But then the preacher continues, just working from our own sacred scriptures, to remind us of those occasions when God previously came among us and behaved in ways we did not expect, in ways we do not appreciate. Jesus reminded the faithful that during the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, God worked the other side of the street. God worked compassionate wonders not for the chosen people but for pagan outsiders. God showed mercy to those who did not worship Israel's God.

Perhaps we're beginning to get the picture, we don't like hearing that God tends to act contrary to our expectations and shows so little respect for the home team.

Evidently, the worshipers expected to be reminded of their favored status as God's chosen people. They did not want to hear about how God has mercy on whomever God decides to have mercy. In fact, Jesus made it sound like God might just choose to love whomever God chooses to love despite their disregard for orthodoxy theology or poor decision making. Jesus' first sermon made it sound like God's love is a wild thing that cannot be controlled nor predicted simply by religious behavior. If prodigal means wasteful and wild, then God's love is prodigal, untamed and likely to stay that way.

What do you expect from a sermon?

The purpose of a sermon is to open your heart to the true and living God, to draw you into a relationship that is life-giving. It's true sometimes sermons do give you nifty hints for living a full and meaningful life. Sometimes something you've been puzzled by comes clear. But the main thing you get is the opportunity to encounter God, a God who desires to be with you in the person of Jesus.

Sometimes, encountering the person of Jesus through the words of the sermon is a life affirming experience that feels good and fills you with faith, hope and love. But sometimes being close to God is a threatening experience. Sometimes sermons ask us to change, to grow, to shift our consciousness and that is unsettling and doesn't always feel great. Somehow sermons are not meant to make you feel good or feel bad, they are meant to get you closer to God, to remind you of who God is and who you are.

I think it was a rabbi who famously summed up the two most important articles of faith for the world's great religious traditions: There is only One God, and you are not it. Perhaps that is the simple point of every sermon, God is God and you are not.

Every person in the synagogue in Nazareth began the day by reciting the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one." Jesus, faithful Jew that he was, reminded the faithful that it's not like the Syrians have their God and we have our patron God who runs errands just for us. There is only one God. Our God is determined to be their God, as well. Our God is not our tamed pet. God is the wildest being in existence.

We are always in danger of attempting to cut the great, glorious God down to our size, to substitute other gods for the true and living God. That's when we ought to pray that we're about to hear a sermon that again reminds us that God is bigger than our meager concepts, our vain desires, and our little projects.

Perhaps we shouldn't expect every sermon to make us feel good. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised if a sermon makes us angry in a way that is asking us to grow and change. There is a line in the baptismal rite that I have always found stunning. It is a question asked of the parents and godparents but applies to all of us. "Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?" (BCP 302).

Wow, what a promise to help one another, especially our children to grow into the full stature of Christ. How impossible it that? We are all works in progress. Each of us is on a life-long journey of growing into the full stature of Christ. I'm afraid that means being stretched, broken and put back together, rubbed the wrong way by Jesus so that we can discover and follow the good way.

What are we looking for in a sermon? I think we want to be reminded of God's deep love for each one of us. However, I think we also want to be reminded of how vast God's love is and that God's love makes our capacity to love look a little stunted, tame, and underdeveloped. Sermons like this can make us angry in that good way, the way of conviction that reminds us that we have really important work to do, we have a ways to go if we are to grow into the full stature of Christ. There is so much forgiving we need to do, there are so many resentments we need to let go of, there

are so many different kinds of people that we find hard to love that we can begin to see differently, as beloved of God.

Now, I'm not for a minute saying that you should go to a church that makes you mad every time you attend. I've done that and it is not a spiritually helpful experience. What I'm saying is that good preaching should be both life-affirming and uncomfortable. Preaching should both draw us into the love of God and show us where we are not living in that love. Preaching should make us deeply joyful and help us to discover our hidden wound. Good preaching should tell us that God accepts us just as we are, and at the same time energize us to become more Christ-like because we know that is where true life, life that keeps welling-up to more life is to be found.

I wonder if you can think of the people in the world that you have the hardest time loving, those bleeding heart liberals that seem to ignore the gravity of personal responsibility and want everyone to have what they need, the smirking Make America Great Again folks that seem to spew so much hate, the tattooed partying neighbor that seems so foul and uncouth, the trust fund kid who drives the Range Rover to school where you work and parks it next to your 2003 Subaru, the terrorist full of seemingly bottomless hate after losing most of his family in a roadside bombing, the woman finally coming out of the shadows to accuse someone you really respected of abuse, the smug CEO who just raked in 23 million last year, the gun toting white supremacist, or just think about the person at church you are still mad at and won't forgive because of whatever hurt real or imagined they inflicted upon you. Know that God loves each of these people just as truly and madly and deeply as God loves you. And he wants them to change and grow into Christ's likeness just like he desires it for you. And what is more, God is more than likely to share his wild love with each of them in hopes of bringing them home.

Good preaching should be like a friend in your life that tells you the honest to goodness truth so clearly that you want to kill him for it. May the truth set us free to grow in loving relationship with the living God.