

Epiphany 4, Year C 2022  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
January 30, 2022

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

Have you every walked into a conversation in the middle of it? What was that like? When we do not know the beginning and end of a conversation or a book or a story, the piece in the middle usually doesn't make much sense. Our gospel reading from Luke today is like that situation; we pick up Jesus' journey in the middle. Last week Jesus "was praised by everyone" in his hometown. "All the eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him." As Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah, the people are amazed; Jesus is revered and respected; he reads so beautifully.

This whole scene in the synagogue takes place right after Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness. "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone." All of a sudden we move from reverence to riotous, murderous anger. By the end of today's gospel the people are so angry with Jesus that they drive him out of the town in order to throw him over a cliff to his death.

What happened? By teaching **in** the synagogue, Jesus claims the space of a wise teacher, a rabbi. It is outrageous that Jesus would claim to be like a great prophet – and then claim to be the Messiah. And for all that the people have heard about Jesus, he is not doing his miraculous works right here at home. Instead, he insults us, throwing in our face, if you will, our own thoughts. We quickly start thinking. Hey – "Is not this Joseph's son?" When we hear about a successful person who is someone we've known all of our lifetime, we think, "I know him – he's Joe's son! Why ... ." We KNOW that Joe's son could not possibly be somebody important and wise. Joe, after all, is a laborer, a carpenter, and we remember when his son toppled over a precious urn of water, acted up in synagogue, was running through the desert with our own kids. Joe's son could not be this same learned person in the synagogue, let alone our savior.

But Jesus (Joe's son) IS here, and he did great things in Capernaum; maybe he'll do the same things here. We are hopeful, even though a moment ago we were all-knowing about the future worth of child-Jesus. This is one of those times when Jesus replies in a way that stirs up EVERYTHING. First, he lets us know that he knows exactly what we think of him, having known him "forever" – "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." How dare he know what we were thinking? Joseph's son, indeed. We *knew* he'd never amount to anything....

Jesus provokes us even more. He reminds us of the work of God through the prophets Elisha and Elijah. God works through prophets – Elisha, Elijah, and himself?! Jesus says that his words as fulfilling the scripture of Isaiah, that Jesus is the embodiment, the physical Messiah. That's quite a grand statement from Joe's son. And those prophets! Elijah, at God's command, lived with a poor widow in Zarephath; the widow was getting ready to prepare a final meal for herself and son, after which they would starve to death. While Elijah stayed with her, her remaining handful of flour and little bit of oil, the only thing between her and her son's deaths, did not run out. At God's command, and with God, Elijah provided food for the poor widow and her son. Widows, we know are outsiders – they have no standing in our world. They are often invisible to us. How dare Jesus call us out on the way that we are neglecting them!

Elisha is even worse: he healed a commander of the Syrian army, Naaman, who had leprosy. Remember the story. Naaman goes to Elisha's tent, and Elisha "sends someone out" to tell Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan River 7 times, after which Naaman will be completely cured. Naaman, with his horses and chariots, "storms off" after hearing this message! "I thought for sure he would stand in front of me and pray to the Lord his God, then wave his hand over my skin and cure me," Naaman grumbles. "What about the Abana River or

the Pharpar River? Those rivers in Damascus are just as good as any river in Israel.” Naaman’s servants said to him, “Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it. So why don’t you do what he said? Go wash and be cured.” Elisha did not ask Naaman to do something hard, so Naaman “knew” that he would not be cured. We remember that a prophet does not ask us to do the impossible; prophets always give us something to do that is within our power and ability to do. Still, we think we know more than the voice of a prophet, so we grumble and complain ... all the way to our cure. And – how dare Elisha heal a leper – another ultimate outsider to our community and way of life. Jesus wants us to remember *his story*? Why would Jesus throw those healings at us?

Jesus is letting the synagogue crowd know that God’s healing and mercy extend far beyond themselves. God loves and looks over everyone, not only the people of the synagogue, the “in” crowd, and that infuriates the people as much as it would us. Jesus won’t do his miracle here, among us. Instead, we faithful people have our own faults presented to them by Joe’s son who is claiming to be the Messiah – he is the physical fulfillment of scripture, sitting in front of them. How dare Jesus – how dare God ... be God!

Our thoughts have moved from admiration, even reverence, to an attempt on Jesus’ life. If Jesus and God cannot fit into our way of thinking, well, they might as well be dead. It is hard to imagine God, harder to understand that God is indeed big enough to outthink us, “outheal” us, and in the process, to point out who is God and ... that we are not God. It is God’s love that can heal the world. We are called (sometimes) to move way out of our comfort zones and by God’s hands and feet to help people who are nothing like ourselves. It is the perfect love of God that can accomplish just that.

It is that active, complete, unlimited love that Paul writes about in his first letter to the Corinthians. It is a passage familiar to many of us, often used at weddings. In this portion of Paul’s letter, he is soothing the people of Corinth, for they are very different from one another. Like every community, even this one, we have different opinions, educations, political parties, views on many issues of the day. Paul steers our thoughts from our surface differences and writes about the ONE Holy Spirit; the same Spirit that was with Jesus in the desert, in the Temple, and at his baptism. Paul is strong when he writes that there are many gifts and one body. “Strive for the greater gifts,” he writes; “and I will show you an even more excellent way.” That more excellent way is to meet everyone, not from the recognition of our differences, but from a grounding of love. This love is an indiscriminate gift. We are reminded here that love is a verb. Love: rejoices, bears, believes, hopes, and endures. This is the standard to which we are called in order to bring God’s kingdom among us, in us. Can we accomplish this complete acting in love? No, because we are human and “see dimly.” One day we will “see Love face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” There is the gift. That we are fully known even before we are born. We are fully known and loved completely. We strive to love as we have been loved, to see as we are seen, and to treat one another with a reckless, adventurous love – “one another” being insiders, outsiders, those we love and those we barely tolerate. We can do our best in this love, knowing that Scripture has been fulfilled; that Jesus sits among us, right here – and there – in everyone we meet. Amen!