

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10

Psalm 71: 1 – 6

1 Corinthians 13: 1 – 13

Luke 4: 21 – 30

-----

From today's Gospel, a preview of coming attractions: people are out to kill Jesus. Spoiler alert: it's going to eventually end up like this (cross). But not today. Not yet. Today, we get part two of the story from Luke as Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth to officially kick off his ministry. And today, we get the congregation's response.

The dramatic tension builds as Jesus carefully rolls up the delicate parchment scroll of the Torah and hands it back to the synagogue attendant. Then Jesus sits down, the traditional position for a rabbi to indicate that he is about to teach and impart wisdom. The crowd, filled with kith and kin, is excited. The air practically tingles with anticipation as all eyes focus on Jesus. "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he says, rather matter-of-factly. There's a quiet pause as everyone takes in that brief statement, minds racing to figure out the implications. Does Jesus mean that God has chosen a prophet from Galilee? God's never done that before! Does Jesus mean that HE is the prophet? Right in our midst? Really? Finally?? Wow! "God's special favor must be on us in Galilee!" they're thinking. Everyone's excited for the possibility of what this might mean. Didn't they always know that Jesus would grow up to be somebody? Weren't they right there when Jesus turned his first table leg on the lathe in Joseph's shop? Now, Jesus could stop right there, and not say anything else, and leave with everyone smiling and feeling good (if a little puzzled) about his inaugural homily. But he doesn't.

Just as the air of glorious smugness begins to get a little too thick and heady, Jesus bursts all their bubbles of grandeur. "It's not quite like you think," he says, in not quite those words. Seeming to read their minds, Jesus fires the first volley across the bow. "You're going to say to me, 'Doctor, heal yourself.' And then, you're going to ask me to do all the things for you that you've heard I've already done in that (mostly Gentile) city of Capernaum." Before the congregation can get over their surprise at this challenge, Jesus continues. "Well, consider this. Here are two good examples of God turning from the Israelites to shower divine favor upon pagans: Elijah and the widow, and Elisha and the leper."

The proud, if quizzical, smiles have turned to stone. The people are suddenly infuriated. What does Jesus mean by throwing these stories of Elijah and Elisha up in their faces? It's like Jesus is taunting them, or rubbing their noses in his wide-open, expansive God that is WAY too inclusive and unboundaried for their tastes. Now, to be fair, Jesus is not telling them anything they don't know. They've heard this scripture from Isaiah a hundred times. But for Jesus to run roughshod over it and use it to say that God can just reach out and bless whomever God feels like blessing is too much for them. It goes against everything they've ever been taught. It goes against their tradition. It goes against their idea of how special the Israelites are as the chosen people of God. The God that Jesus merely reminds them of is a dangerous God! A God who can't be contained by their ideas. A God who is far too gracious. A God who is NOT under their control. A God whose sense of community is far bigger than their own.

So, en masse, the crowd rushes towards Jesus pushing him out of the synagogue and towards the brow of a hill, so Luke says. Stoning, the punishment for blasphemy, can be done by throwing stones at someone or by throwing someone at stones, and they choose the latter. For the most part, Nazareth has only gently sloping hills and therefore no brow of a hill over which to push that certain someone. There is one hill, probably at least a mile distant, with something of a steep side to it. It's known today as "the Mount of Precipitation" or the "Mount of the Leap" and tradition has it that this is the place where the enraged crowd tries to do away with Jesus. It's hard to imagine them commandeering him nearly a mile. These hills are riddled with caves, however, and perhaps that's how he manages to slip away and hide.

But maybe the exact geography and terrain aren't as important to the evangelist, Luke, as the point of the story he is telling. Unlike Mark and Matthew who have this story much farther along in Jesus' ministry and in their gospels, Luke places it early on, foreshadowing all that is to come. Just as the selection from Isaiah that Jesus reads is a job description for Jesus' ministry, the fact that people want to kill him (keep in mind these are family and friends – the ones who are supposed to be on his side!) is a reminder of Jesus' coming passion. The rejection of the people in the synagogue will be mirrored by the rejection of the Temple leaders and crowds in Jerusalem. And the use of the word hill is a sly wink at the hill of Calvary, with its three crosses. And when Jesus anticipates the congregation's response as "Doctor, heal yourself!" it is a direct allusion to the Temple leaders taunting Jesus on the cross, saying, "He saved others, let him save himself." Heal and save are the same word in Hebrew. If Jesus is hiding from the mob in a cave, perhaps that is also a hint at being in the tomb, where once again, Jesus will slip away mysteriously. If this were a musical or an opera, what Luke is doing would be called an overture – running the themes, the motifs, by us so they will be familiar when we get to them again.

Barbara Brown Taylor (*Home by Another Way*, "*The Company of Strangers*") tells the story of a retreat to which she went. The participants were asked to consider who had been a Christ figure for them in their lives. As they sat in the large circle, one by one, the stories came out. Stories of comfort, compassion and rescue. Stories of Jesus as friend, as buddy. They were all having such a warm, fuzzy, kumbayah kind of moment. Until one woman got up and spoke. "Well, the first thing I thought about," she said, "when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, 'Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'" That woman, rather like Jesus in the synagogue, burst the bubble of the group which was in the midst of that blissful moment. The woman got their attention.

Christ is not only the one who comforts and rescues us, Taylor notes. Christ is also the one who challenges and upsets us, telling us the truth so clearly that we will do anything – appalling things – to make him shut up. If we don't believe that, Taylor continues, perhaps it's because we haven't recognized Christ in some of the offensive people God has sent our way. Not everyone, mind you, but some of them – the people sent to yank our chains and upset our equilibrium so we do not confuse our own ideas of God with, well, GOD.

Back in 1960, there was a little girl named Ruby Bridges. She was six years old, African-American and living in New Orleans. It was, of course, the time of desegregation in many places in the south. Ruby was the first black child to integrate William Franz Elementary School. By the time she was

allowed to go to school there, many white families had already withdrawn their children and sent them elsewhere.

Day after day, Ruby walked past menacing mobs on her way to school. A little over three years later, Norman Rockwell would paint an iconic centerfold for *Look* magazine of little Ruby, walking confidently between the federal officers protecting her. It was entitled "The Problem We All Live With." On the wall in the background, the "n" word and "KKK" have been scrawled and there are splashes where rotten tomatoes, aimed at Ruby, have hit the wall instead and ended up squashed on the sidewalk.

Once Ruby arrived at school, she would end up sitting alone in her classroom, just her and her teacher. Her teacher, who was white, was not thrilled to be working under this "awful federal desegregation order," but she stayed anyway. Later, she would say, "I don't know where little Ruby got the courage to do what she did...I would watch her walk with those federal marshalls, and you couldn't help but hear what the people said to her. They called her the worst imaginable names. They were ready to kill her...I never wanted integration, but I couldn't have said those things to a child – no matter what race."

The teacher said that Ruby would just smile at everyone, even as they yelled out death threats. But Ruby didn't seem afraid. At first, the teacher thought that Ruby was a little slow, that she didn't quite grasp what was going on. But she quickly found out just how bright Ruby was. Ruby knew exactly what was going on and that she could be killed. One day, when Ruby came into the classroom, she told the teacher that she felt sorry for all of them, and that she was praying for them. Questioned later by someone writing about the event who was trying to figure out what was going on *inside* of Ruby, the little girl responded that she was just trying to go to school. Asked if she was ever afraid, Ruby said, "I do what my Granny says; I just keep praying."

As the angry mob from the synagogue probably hurls venomous names at Jesus and tries to kill him, that's probably what Jesus is doing – praying. It's what he will do from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." Jesus isn't surrounded by federal troops, but he is surrounded by the grace of God, and perhaps those same angels that ministered to him in the wilderness.

The folks in Nazareth are quite comfortable and content with a Nazareth-sized God, one who snuggles in, as they have, among the surrounding hills, and one who knows everyone there. A 'Cheers' kind of God. Many of us are willing to settle for a God smaller than anything portrayed in the Bible. We want a god who respects *our* boundaries, thinks the way we do and has all the same likes and dislikes that we do. But no matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to get a God who respects our boundaries, who is content to abide by our rules. God keeps opening doors where we want walls. God keeps erasing our lines in the sand.

The problem is not that we are loved any less. The problem is that God keeps loving people that we don't want to love. God keeps upsetting our sense, our definition of community. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, in church, we are dared to believe that it is God who makes us a community and not we ourselves, and that our differences are God's best tools for opening us up to the Truth that is bigger than we are. God wants our theology to be bigger than our geography. Because the truth is always more than any one of us can grasp all by ourselves.

+