

Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Date: January 28, 2007

Sermon Title: The Invitation from Christ

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is *The Fourth Sunday after the Day of Epiphany*, and we find ourselves half-way through this season in the church calendar. The Season of Epiphany is not one that most people know much about. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter – these seasons are well known by many Christians – even by some who aren't part of a liturgical church.

But Epiphany: this season is less familiar than those other four. Epiphany is the season squeezed in between Christmas and Lent. It begins on *The Day of Epiphany* (January 6), when we remember the wise men who came from the east to honor Jesus. It ends on *The Transfiguration of Our Lord* (the Sunday before *Ash Wednesday*), when we remember the day Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop, and appeared with Moses and Elijah. In between, Epiphany is known to many as "the season of light" (that is why so many of the hymns and songs in our Epiphany worship folder work with the theme of light). The word *Epiphany* is a Greek word, and literally translated, it means "to shed light upon." During the season of Epiphany we study Bible lessons and listen to sermons that are designed to shed light on who God is, and what God is doing these days.

This morning's Gospel lesson is a continuation from the lesson we read last week. If you were at worship you will remember that Jesus has grown up, has been baptized by John, has spent forty days in the wilderness, and now he returns to his hometown of Nazareth, and preaches to his family and friends for the very first time. It should have been a grand occasion – this small town boy made good – the people of Nazareth should have been proud and loving and complimentary.

I remember well the first time I preached in my hometown. It was in 1984. My family was so excited for me. Many of my friends were there – some I had grown up with, and some were classmates of mine at Seminary. It would be an understatement to say that I was pretty nervous. It's a daunting task to preach for people who knew you when you were in diapers. There were four services that morning, and I spoke at each of them. In the line at the door after worship, many who were there lied and told me I did a great job. They were wrong, of course. It was a pretty bad sermon, and rather poorly delivered. But they were excited for me, and proud of me, and I'm sure they thought that with a little encouragement I could become a decent preacher. Mom and Dad threw a huge party in our house after it was all over, and everybody headed home that afternoon with smiles on their faces.

The day when Jesus preached in Nazareth should have been like that. And it certainly started out that way. He read a text from Isaiah 61, spoke a few words, and St. Luke tells us his listeners were "amazed at the gracious words that come from his mouth." They seem genuinely surprised that one of them – Joseph's son – was able to speak so well. They do, indeed, seem impressed with him at first. One imagines the party Mary had planned back at home, and how proud she must have been of her son, this servant of God, all grown up and making a difference in the Synagogue.

But all of a sudden, something unexpected happens: Jesus looks out into the congregation, filled with people who have known him and loved him nearly all of his life, and he begins to challenge them. He says, "I'm sure you are all hoping to see me toss out a miracle or two while I'm here, but don't count on it. Hometowns are notorious for rejecting prophets who grow up in their midst." And if that isn't enough to get their

FIRST LESSON  
JEREMIAH 1:4-10

PSALM  
PSALM 71:1-6

SECOND LESSON  
1ST CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

GOSPEL LESSON  
ST. LUKE 4:21-30

PRAYER OF THE DAY

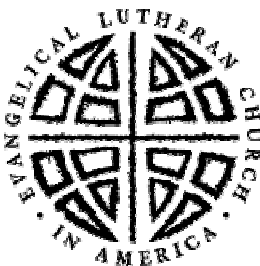
ALMIGHTY AND EVER-LIVING  
GOD, INCREASE IN US THE GIFTS  
OF FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE; AND  
THAT WE MAY OBTAIN WHAT  
YOU PROMISE, MAKE US LOVE  
WHAT YOU COMMAND,  
THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS  
CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD.  
AMEN.

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attention, he goes on to remind them that Elijah only saved one widow from starvation and she was not a Jew; and Elisha only healed one leper, and he wasn't either, implying that neither of them was particularly interested in benefiting the people of their own country and, by implication, neither was Jesus. It is a surprising turn in what otherwise might have been a touching story. Surrounded by admiring friends and neighbors, Jesus lets them have it. You're here looking for miracles. You're looking for what you can get out of me. Well, give up, because it isn't going to happen that way.

Why was he so hard on his own people? I don't know. Maybe it was something he saw in their eyes. Maybe it was because he grew up among them, and knew them better than any. But Jesus knew. He knew that Nazareth wanted it all for themselves. And if they were excited to have Jesus with them, it was because of what they hoped might come their way. They had heard of the many signs and wonders he performed at Capernaum. "If he was willing to do that for complete strangers, just imagine what he might be willing to do for us!"

Of course, such is not the life of one who follows Jesus, and probably none of the Gospel writers makes that more clear than St. Luke. Luke has a deep concern for the needy ones of this world, and he tells many stories of the care and compassion Jesus has for the hungry, the poor, the blind, the lepers... Luke is determined to teach us that Jesus gave his life for the world, and now invites us to do the same.

That's what irks the residents of Nazareth. Jesus doesn't want to focus on what they can get from attending synagogue with him, or from having him back in their home town. No, Jesus is more interested in recruiting them to join him in changing the world. Mary may have had the table set back home, the Jell-O salad cooled, and a pot of de-cafeinated coffee on the counter, but Jesus doesn't play that game. He speaks the truth, the hard truth. And rather than a celebration in his honor at his house, they rush him out of the synagogue, drive him out of town, and try to throw him off the hill and kill him.

It is a very dramatic story. And it reveals the dramatic difference between Jesus and his hometown friends and neighbors. They were interested in what they could get out of him. He was interested in what he, and they, could give to the world. They were excited about the inside influence they would have since he came from their town. He was interested in sharing his gifts in every corner of the world.

It reminds me of the old fable – I've shared it with some of you before – of the woman who had suffered a terrible loss. She went to the local healer, and asked him what he could do to take away her grief. He thought for a moment, and then instructed her to go to the house in their village where there had been no sorrow, and from that house borrow a cup of flower. If she would bring it to him, then he would make a balm that could take away her grief. And so she went from door to door, asking whether or not the occupants in that home had been without sorrow. At every door, she met friends and neighbors who poured their hearts out to her, sharing with her the sorrow they had known. As she listened to them, and cared for them, and realized how much she had in common with them, she found that over time her sorrow diminished, and she began to discover the healing power that her visits had. Even after her own sorrow had healed, she continued to make those visits, and continued to care for those people, and she found that as she gave of herself to others, it filled her life with a sense of meaning and purpose that displaced the sorrow from her heart.

This is the Season of Epiphany, and during this season we consider how these ancient stories shed light on who God is, and what God is up to in our world today. Friends, we are not here because being a Christian, or belonging to Saint Peter is such a great deal. We are not here because we believe we can get more out of life by being believers... or more out of this congregation than any other congregation we've attended. We are not here because our faith and our church membership is another one of many good influences in our lives. No, this story reveals to us the truth that God loves us enough to die for us – and God has invited us to live in such a way that we give our lives for the world. That is the essence of Christian discipleship, and that is the life that this morning's text commends to us.

Let me leave with you with this one question:

QUESTION OF THE DAY:

How is it that God is calling you away from the prison of your own self-interest, and into the freedom of living for others?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 28, 2007)

English Text: <sup>i</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Then he [Jesus] began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" <sup>23</sup> He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" <sup>24</sup> And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. <sup>25</sup> But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. <sup>ii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>21</sup> ἤρξατο δὲ λέγειν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ὅτι σήμερον πεπλήρωται ἡ γραφή αὕτη ἐν τοῖς ὠσίν ὑμῶν. <sup>22</sup> Καὶ πάντες ἐμαρτύρουν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐθαύμαζον ἐπὶ τοῖς λόγοις τῆς χάριτος τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔλεγον· οὐχὶ υἱὸς ἐστὶν Ἰωσήφ οὗτος; <sup>23</sup> καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· πάντως ἐρεῖτε μοι τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην· ἰατρέ, θεράπευσον σεαυτόν· ὅσα ἠκούσαμεν γενόμενα εἰς τὴν Καφαρναοὺμ ποίησον καὶ ὧδε ἐν τῇ πατρίδι σου. <sup>24</sup> εἶπεν δέ· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐδεὶς προφήτης δεκτός ἐστιν ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ. <sup>25</sup> ἐπ' ἀληθείας δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, πολλαὶ χῆραι ἦσαν ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἡλίου ἐν τῷ Ἰσραήλ, ὅτε ἐκλείσθη ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπὶ ἔτη τρία καὶ μῆνας ἕξ, ὡς ἐγένετο λιμὸς μέγας ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν, <sup>26</sup> καὶ πρὸς οὐδεμίαν αὐτῶν ἐπέμφθη Ἡλίας εἰ μὴ εἰς Σάρεπτα τῆς Σιδωνίας πρὸς γυναῖκα χήραν. <sup>27</sup> καὶ πολλοὶ λεπροὶ ἦσαν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραήλ ἐπὶ Ἐλισαίου τοῦ προφήτου, καὶ οὐδεὶς αὐτῶν ἐκαθαρίσθη εἰ μὴ Ναιμὰν ὁ Σύρος. <sup>28</sup> καὶ ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες θυμοῦ ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ ἀκούοντες ταῦτα <sup>29</sup> καὶ ἀναστάντες ἐξέβαλον αὐτὸν ἔξω τῆς πόλεως καὶ ἤγαγον αὐτὸν ἕως ὄφρυός τοῦ ὄρους ἐφ' οὗ ἡ πόλις ὑκοδόμητο αὐτῶν ὥστε κατακρημνίσαι αὐτόν. <sup>30</sup> αὐτὸς δὲ διελθὼν διὰ μέσου αὐτῶν ἐπορεύετο. <sup>iii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html).

<sup>ii</sup> St. Luke 4:21-30, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Luke 4:21-30, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).