

**Oran Warder    St. Paul's Church    February 2/3, 2019    4 Epiphany - Year C**

*When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage (Luke 4:28).*

I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

There was once a young priest called to be the rector of a church for the first time. Her predecessor was a beloved old priest who had served the congregation for many decades. The new rector was so excited about serving her new congregation, but her excitement wore off quickly. It was a very short honeymoon. She had barely been installed as the new rector when a smoldering disagreement within the congregation grew into a full-fledged conflict. It seemed that roughly half of the congregation preferred to kneel during the Eucharistic prayer, while the other half preferred to stand during the Eucharist. And in spite of her best attempts to affirm both preferences as perfectly acceptable and both were traditional practices, and in spite of her best efforts to encourage people to follow their own conscience while also allowing others to follow theirs – the conflict only worsened. It got so bad that the two groups formed into warring factions with all the standers gathered on one side of the church and all the kneelers on the other- and the new young rector squarely in the middle. Each side had determined that they represented the true tradition of the parish, and the other side was simply wrong. Things deteriorated to the point that at the monthly vestry meeting (which was also evenly split between stand-ers and kneel-ers) it was communicated quite clearly to the new new rector that she needed to address the problem and fix it – or perhaps start looking for a new job. The poor woman was so distressed, she didn't quite know what to do, so she decided to go and visit the old rector to see if he had any wisdom or advice. She went to see him and he was visibly sad as she filled him in on what was happening at the church. At the conclusion of her comments and in desperation she said, I have come to you hoping that you can settle this dispute once and for all, can you tell me, is it standing or kneeling – can you help me understand the tradition of the parish? He sat in silence for a moment and then said, I'm so sorry, I honestly cannot remember, but did you say that the congregation is divided and conflicted and they have asked you to leave? Now THAT he said is the tradition of the church – that I remember.

Not even Jesus was immune from the tradition of congregational conflict, and in the case of the gospel passage we have just heard, the congregation is unified in its opposition against him. And it does seem that getting rid of a preacher was a bit simpler in New Testament times than it is today. Apparently in Jesus' day you could just run him off a cliff. I, for one, am happy that times have changed.

Yet the people were enraged. Notice how quickly it happens. Last week we heard that Jesus reads the scriptures and *all eyes are fixed on him*. He announces that the scriptures have been fulfilled and *all spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words*. They were filled with expectation, that is, until they realize the meaning of his words. Expectation turns to angry opposition. Angry opposition turns to rage. Rage turns to violence.

Jesus has gone from preaching to meddling. He has gone from being Nazareth's favorite son to being a treasonous betrayer of Israel. The one who proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord, is now deemed unacceptable by his own people. In the ancient tradition that we hear today from the prophet Jeremiah and all the prophets before and after, Jesus proclaims the words that God wants spoken, and not the words that people want to hear. It is not the first time that God's word evokes rage. And for Jesus, God's incarnate Word, it will not be the last.

Why are the people of Nazareth so enraged to the point of violence against their native son - the Messiah? They are convinced that they alone are God's elect and they are unable and unwilling to hear any other truth. Jesus, who had raised their hopes and expectations, becomes a huge disappointment. It is bad enough to discover that Jesus had already extended God's favor to the largely gentile community of Capernaum (Strike 1), it is even worse to be reminded that there were plenty of widows in Israel at the time of Elijah, yet Elijah chose to minister to the poor widow of Zarephath in Sidon, a gentile woman (Strike 2), it is even worse still to be reminded that there were plenty of lepers in Israel at the time of Elisha, yet Elisha chose to heal Naaman, the Syrian soldier, an enemy of Israel (Strike 3). In a time when gentiles were despised, and in a time when Israel suffered under oppressive Roman occupation, Jesus' words were intolerable. The long-awaited Messiah was to come and destroy Israel's enemies, not to preach good news to them. The people are enraged.

I am a preacher who would like to keep his job - but today's Gospel does beg the question. Who are those people for us, who stand across the divide - across the aisle - across the border - across the street - across the world - Those we cannot abide? Those who from our perspective are not worthy of the Kingdom of God? And what are the words that God wants spoken to us, that we do not want to hear? What are the words that might enrage us? I suspect that they are the same words that Jesus spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth - words that ring of love of God, love of neighbor, love of enemy, love even of those who wish us harm.

Jesus, the prophet, offends the people of Nazareth by using their own scriptures to challenge their sense of privilege. Jesus is clear from the very beginning of his ministry that the scope of his message is universal. The Good News he proclaims is for Israel, yes, it is also for all the nations of the earth. Privilege has no place in the gospel that Jesus proclaims. It was true then and it is true now. It was true for them, and it is true for us. Not exactly the news that we who hold great privilege want to hear.

Luke tells us that Jesus passed through the midst of them. He passes through the midst of the angry people and takes the road to Jerusalem - the road that leads to the cross - the road that ultimately leads to our reconciliation with God and with one another. Today Jesus passes through in the midst of us and invites us to follow.

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