

## Jeff's Reflection – Jan 30 2022

In reading from the Gospel of Luke, we encounter – in just nine verses – an abrupt and dramatic change in the behaviour of the people listening to Jesus.

In the story, Jesus has returned to his hometown of Nazareth. The people of Nazareth had heard of his teachings and activities in other villages, so perhaps they viewed him not only as Mary and Joseph's son, but as a visiting rabbi.

As a visiting rabbi, it would not be unusual for Jesus to find himself invited to read scripture during a synagogue gathering, and then to comment on the passage and lead a discussion on the passage.

Last week, we read that, on this occasion, Jesus was handed a scroll containing some of the words of the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus read the words of Isaiah, words originally intended for people in exile in Babylon several hundred years earlier, words of good news that captives would be freed, the blind would see, the year of Jubilee would be celebrated.

When he finished reading from the scroll, Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And we are told that the people were impressed. The writer of Luke's gospel says that "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?'"

The people were impressed by the hometown boy who was making a name for himself. They were ready to sign on as members of the Jesus fan club.

Now, let us skip forward just seven sentences in this story, and what do we find? Now we are told that everyone in the synagogue was filled with rage and they drove Jesus out of town. They pressed him to the brow of the hill, with the intent, we are told of hurling him to his death.

What happened? How did adulation turn so quickly to hatred?

The story doesn't tell us directly. We have to read the story and hope it gives us a clue.

Jesus hears the words of praise, and says, "Doubtless you will quote me the proverb, 'Doctor cure yourself'."

If I had been there, one of those praising Jesus, I suspect I would still have been smiling, but I also would have been wondering, "Where did that come from?"

'Doctor, cure yourself.' – as a proverb, that's okay. We probably wouldn't want to trust

ourselves to any doctor who wouldn't want to have themselves as their own doctor.

But why is Jesus quoting this Proverb which seems to have nothing to do with the Isaiah reading? Perhaps because Jesus was saying that, in this case, the 'yourself' was not just an individual, but the individual's community: 'Doctor, cure your own.'

In other words, it's great that you've built something of a reputation and a following in all those other villages, Jesus, but now you are home, you are in your community, with your own people – so now 'cure'-here; now benefit us – here; do in your hometown the things you did at Capernaum.' You read really well, but now get to the big stuff, the exciting stuff, the stuff that really impresses people.

I think that may be how we are to hear this proverb in this context because of where Jesus goes after quoting the proverb. He goes to the prophetic history of the faith.

Jesus begins with a comment that may have sounded somewhat ungrateful considering that people had said such flattering things about him after hearing him read.

Jesus says, "Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

I suspect that was a mood-changer. We just said how well you were doing, how impressed we all are – of course we accept you. How can you be so rude!

Jesus went on talking. If he was going to be considered to be a prophet, then he was going to remind them of what prophets do. So he referred to one of the all-star prophets of their faith history – Elijah!

The prophets throughout the Jewish faith story had spoken on behalf of God to call the people, the nation, back to compassion- and there was almost a formula prophetic proclamation to remember and to 'care for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner and the poor.'

To remember those most vulnerable, most at risk, those with the least access to making a living, to surviving day to day.

Jesus reminds the people of a time when a famine had devastated the land for three years. People were hungry. In such a time, one might look to the prophet to call on God for an end to the famine. One might turn to the prophet to manage a miracle so that people would be fed. Elijah did that, said Jesus, but not in his hometown, not even in his home country. He went to Sidon (located in what today is the country of Lebanon). Sidon, according to the book of Judges, had at one time oppressed Israel and been an enemy. Yet, God sent Elijah to Sidon, and there Elijah performed miracles. There Elijah ensured that hungry widow received food.

It was just a bit of history, but I imagine that reference by Jesus to this bit of history was met by silence, by people starting to shift uncomfortably as they sat.

Jesus continued. And then there was the prophet Elisha, who cleansed a leper, but not a leper from Judah or Israel. Rather Elisha cured Naaman, a general in the Syrian army.

Just two little stories, and by the time Jesus was finished talking the adoring listeners had become an angry mob.

Why? What happened? What had Jesus said or done to incite them?

Some Biblical historians and scholars suggest that what Jesus had done was to puncture the balloon of the people's expectations.

Scholars point out that in the ancient world that Jesus was not the only person with a reputation for healing and doing wondrous deeds and for drawing an audience with charismatic and insightful teachings.

There were others, but the others hadn't grown up in Nazareth. Jesus was theirs. This was his town. And so he should honour his town. He should seek first the benefit of his town.

The historians say that the expectation for someone like Jesus would be that he would set up shop in his hometown. He would establish a business address. He wouldn't wander around the countryside handing out free health care. He would let it be known that he was operating in Nazareth and people who wanted to see him, hear him, perhaps be healed by him, should come to Nazareth.

And that would be good news for the economy of Nazareth, because now you would have to have structure. You would have to have local people process the clients, organize them in some kind of order to see Jesus, manage Jesus' agenda for him.

The people coming to see Jesus would have to buy food – good for the local economy. They might need lodging for the evening if they had travelled some distance – again good for the economy. Maybe some local craftspeople, makers of bowls or walking sticks, could set up booths for the people to shop at while they waited to see Jesus- again good for the local economy.

And Nazareth would benefit. The people of Nazareth would benefit. Jesus' hometown, Jesus' people, would benefit. That's what should happen!

As it became evident that Jesus was not going to follow that script, the hometown fans grew hostile.

And why didn't Jesus follow the expected script? I suggest it was because Jesus was following the script of God – the unpredictable God, God who cannot be contained, cannot be managed, cannot be domesticated. God who surprises, God who amazes,

God who meets us in people and places we don't anticipate.

This story comes early in the Gospel of Luke, giving readers a preview of this surprising God who is active and whose activity will not be contained by the boundaries we try to impose on God. This story gives a preview of this surprising God by starting with a 'review' of what this surprising God has done in the lives of Elijah and Elisha, what this surprising God did for a widow at Zarephath and general from Syria.

As we read this story, we can expand on the review of times and ways that God was found in surprising places and actions.

We may remember God speaking from a burning bush in the wilderness, of a surprised Moses looking around wondering, "Where's that voice coming from?"

We may remember those who fled Pharaoh's pyramid schemes to discover that life could be lived, even in wilderness.

Remember Sabbath and Jubilee commandments aimed at ensuring that those in debt were given a new chance.

Remember a people conquered and taken from their temple, their homeland, their place of identity, and exiled to Babylon, where they would weep as they remembered Zion.

We remember prophets telling the people that they would emerge from wilderness, emerge from exile, that God both plucks up and plants, brings endings to birth new beginnings.

We remember Jesus, also in wilderness, trusting that all could be fed.

We remember Jesus insisting that the children must come, for the kingdom of God is populated with children.

We remember parables that initiated debates and discussions – parables about a Samaritan that embodies compassion, parables about a father who welcomes back the lost and irresponsible child, parables about the greatness of life residing in the tiniest of seeds.

We remember Jesus declaring that the kingdom of God, the community of God, was already present.

We remember grieving disciples being surprised at an empty tomb.

We remember the apostle Paul speaking of God's love requiring inclusive and diverse and generous communities.

This story Luke gives us about Jesus near the beginning of his public activity is a story

not only about Jesus but about the early church and about the church throughout history. The story of the church has contained stories of courageous and compassionate acts of blessing and healing, but the story of the church has also contained lots of stories of 'church fights' – and they began with the early church.

The apostle Paul, whose letters are the earliest writings contained in the New Testament, came in conflict with Peter and James and others who were leaders of the early Christian church in Jerusalem, because Paul said he was called to take the good news of God's love to Gentiles, to non-Jews, and to do so without requiring non-Jews to adhere to all the requirements and practices of the Torah, the Law.

It was a contentious debate from which came permission for Paul to focus his ministry on Gentiles while the others followed Jesus within Jewish communities.

There have been plenty of contentious church debates since then. Some of the 'recent ones' – most of which are ongoing somewhere in the world of Christian churches – were/are the ordination of women, the ordination of people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, the recognition and affirmation of God's image in all people, inter-faith dialogue and learning about God and about faithful practices from other faith traditions, acknowledging, confessing and seeking reconciliation because of the church's role in trying to eliminate indigenous people, indigenous spirituality, indigenous cultures and languages...

And today, in North American as well as in European countries, Christian churches are faced with a loss of status in increasingly secular societies; churches wonder what the church will be in the future.

I think we would like to read this story in Luke's gospel and say that the people of Jesus' hometown just didn't get it, they didn't understand that Jesus was speaking on behalf of God, they were just focused on their own welfare and benefit.

But much as that reading gives us a feeling of holding the theological high ground, the message of this story to us today may be to remind us that God is still a talk-to-us-from-a-burning-bush-lead-us-into-a-new-land-shape-us-as-a-new-community-accompany-us-into-exile-rather-than-spare-us-from-exile-and-surprise-us-with-resurrection type of God!

This story, the story of Jesus, the stories throughout scripture, are stories of God who is a living God, stories of God as a living, active presence, stories that God is always creating, transforming, healing, loving life into being.

God is not finished with us, with creation. As we confront changes and challenges in life, we can be tempted to want everything to just be the way it was – some idealized idea or memory of the past when everything and everyone seemed to have a place and to know and accept their place. We can want God to finally give us closure – a final way for the world to be forever and ever.

But God does not do that. God does not bring final closure. God does not seek a final solution. God is engaged in on-going creation.

Bill Coffin, when he was minister of Riverside Church in New York City, used to tell the congregation that the Bible does not end discussions, it begins them; that the Bible is not a book of answers, or a manual of solutions; the Bible is a story of God always leading us to new wisdom, new blessing, new expressions of faith, new creation.

We don't yet know how much more love God will summon from us, whom we will be called to love that we now see as the undesirable other; we don't know in what ways God might summon us to worship, or to be church, or to shape our communities, our economies, our world.

Faith is that is open to God's guiding us to reform, reshape, re-express old laws and experiences in new ways.

Psalms 71, the other reading for today, is a Psalm of trust. We don't know the circumstances of the writer, but we know that the writer was in a desperate and anxious place, and so the writer cried to God, "Deliver me, rescue me, save me!" In a time when God seemed to have left the writer in a place of conflict, the writer still trusted that God had never left. The writer trusted that even then, God's love was present, that God was still creating.

The Bible contains the stories of people who, during times when God seemed absent, discovered a new sense of the presence of God; of people who discovered that their brokenness and woundedness became a pathway to healing and new life; of people who wrestled with uncertainties, and found that it was in their wrestling and uncertainty that their lives were transformed.

Jesus declared that prophets are not accepted when they tell of God being present in ways and circumstances we want to avoid, of God not giving us what we want when what we want limits our embodiment of God's love.

Jesus meets us in our familiar places, to invite us again and again to open our hearts and imaginations to God who surprises us with new creation, who creates in us new depths of love.

We are not alone. We live in God's world. We trust in God. AMEN.