

**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – January 28, 2007
St. John's Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV
Luke 4:21-32 The Prophet in his Hometown**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

From the Gospel: ***“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”***

Last week I had an e-mail from Liddy Hoster¹ reminding me that I was preaching this week. Most of you know, of course, that I was locally trained. Saint John’s is my home town in some sense. So I told her, in jest I assure you, that I planned to tell you that I was a prophet in my home town, and that you folks better listen to me, because I planned to do mighty works!

Liddy warned me that if I did that, I’d best be prepared to run or swim for my life. And so I shall not take that approach...

However, there are three points from today’s Gospel that I’d like to discuss with you. Those are ***prophecy, Jesus’ experience in his home town and faith.***

The word “prophet” is used throughout Scripture, where it means, not necessarily someone who foretells the future, but rather someone who is chosen by God to deliver a message.

Prophecy is not a line of work where you can expect to receive the grateful thanks of those you serve and a gold watch upon retirement. In fact, it is far more likely that if God makes you a prophet, your message will be rejected by those who know you best. And this is what happens to Jesus in his home town.

¹ Priest in charge of St. John’s Episcopal Church at the time of the delivery of this sermon.

The problem is that he's telling his friends and neighbors something they don't want to hear.

For a Christian, there is no greater messenger than Jesus himself, but he was literally run out of town for what he had to say. And of course, eventually his message gets him killed. In the case of today's Gospel, the part of his message that infuriated his audience was a statement that salvation was going to be extended to non-Jews. Our being here today bears witness that the prophecy was correct, but for Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth, that was little comfort.

I don't think Jesus was surprised by this reaction. Saddened, perhaps, but not surprised, because he understood people very well indeed.

Recall his parable about the vineyard owner² who sent his servants to collect the rent for his property, and the tenants kill the servant. Another is sent, and he is also killed. Finally, the owner sends his son, feeling that at last his tenants will see their responsibilities and do what they need to do.

And the tenants kill the son. This is Jesus' description of what will happen to himself.

But why am I telling you this? Now that I have climbed down from my high horse and stopped joking about being a prophet in my home town, what does it matter to the people of Saint John's Episcopal Church in the year two-thousand-seven?

It seems that we have God on the one hand, with a clear and unchanging love for his people, a love so great that he sent his Son to live and die for us; and mankind on the other hand, consistently rejecting God's messengers.

² Luke 20:9-13 as well as Mark and Matthew.

Does that say anything to any of us? Do we reject God's message? To put that a slightly different way, are there prophets among us today? And if there are, what fate awaits them?

I ask that question precisely because here we all are, in church on a Sunday morning, our vestry is on retreat preparing for the arrival of an interim rector to guide us through the next couple of years. Surely we are ready to hear whatever it is God wants to say to us.

But based on the Gospel lesson, I must offer the caution that anyone in our situation, that is to say anyone facing change, has to be on guard that the ideas we hear from others may not fit our predetermined idea of how things should be.

That's really what happens with Jesus in Nazareth – nobody in his audience is prepared to believe that he is really who he says he is. He doesn't fit into their plans – not with that message. Perhaps some of them were even heard to say, "we've always done it that way here." We should try to avoid doing that!

Now, having talked a bit about prophets and a bit about Jesus in Nazareth, I arrive at the third topic I wanted to address this morning, faith.

In very simple terms, faith is accepting as true that which you cannot prove. A definition is found in the Letter to the Hebrews, where the writer says: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see."

When Jesus read in the synagogue at Nazareth, he made a very clear statement and invited his listeners to have faith in what he was saying. Because of their predisposition to their own set of ideas, the people in the congregation were unable to have faith, to even admit that what Jesus was saying might be true.

All of us, all the time, I think, need to be aware of how powerful are our preconceived notions, and how difficult it can be to have faith during a time of change.

And change is what we're facing. We're going to be exploring – as a congregation and as individuals – what we want Saint John's to be in coming years. But this is not a process that is about what we want. It's a question of what we believe God is calling us to do.

We know that mighty works have been done here in the past, and they continue today. Those acts happened because God put into the hearts of his people, into your hearts, that something needed to be done, and from that came Manna Meal, Covenant House, and so much more. The people who held that message in their hearts had to be willing to become prophets and speak the truth as they believed God had showed it to them.

So how do we engage in being prophets, that is to say listening for and then speaking the words which define what God has in mind for us to do? How do we have the faith it takes to really listen for what God has to say when the prophet is sitting in the pew next to you?

Well, to start with, let's remember the tenants in the vineyard. Let's not kill the messengers!

We need to do a lot of holy listening.

In the context of what we are about to face, let us re-visit the Old Testament lesson for today. I invite you to listen again to what the Lord and Jeremiah had to say to one another, because I believe God is saying it to us as well:

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

⁶ Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” ⁷ But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”³

The Lord will reach out to each of us, and give us the words to say.

Have faith, my friends, that he will done so. Speak to one another. Listen to one another. Pray that the Peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, invades our hearts and minds, and suffuses this place with God’s glory. There is much work to do for God’s kingdom, and we, by God’s grace, are the ones who will do it.

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Je 1:4