

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
Church of the Savior-Episcopal
Orange City, Iowa
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THROWING JESUS OFF THE CLIFF

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. LUKE 4.29

It's a strange and disturbing story.

Jesus, just baptized by his cousin John, is driven—or is it led?—by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days and put to the test by the Devil. He returns to Galilee where he begins teaching in the synagogues and healing. Soon he is being praised by everyone.

Now, back in his hometown, Nazareth, Jesus attends synagogue there and, as we heard last week, reads from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

He returns the scroll and sits down. Then he breaks the expectant silence with a stunning announcement: “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” The people of Nazareth understand that Jesus has just audaciously identified himself with the anointed—messianic—savior Isaiah foretells. Understandably, they are surprised—“*Isn't this Joseph's son?*”—but their initial reaction is not negative; on the contrary: “*All spoke well of him.*” For them, he speaks not

the words of a charlatan, megalomaniac, or local boy gone off his head, but “*words of grace.*”

Things go bad only when Jesus picks a fight, acting as though they *have* rejected him, provoking them, saying that while he has done miracles in other places, he will do none for them. *Now* they are filled with rage, drive him out of the synagogue and try to throw him off a cliff.

What’s hard to see is why Jesus provokes them like this. Why does he respond as though they are rejecting this prophet in his hometown? Perhaps, “*Isn’t this Joseph’s son?*” expresses some skepticism along with surprise, but it hardly suggests hostility to Jesus’ messianic assertion.

Nor does anything in the text suggest that they are so angry they want to kill him because he claims to fulfill the ancient prophecy. It’s not the claim that Jesus can do the wonderful things Isaiah foretells as the sign of God’s anointed coming to Israel’s deliverance; what sets them off is Jesus saying that he’ll bring God’s deliverance to other places but that there’s nothing for his own people. He’s the long-awaited liberator of the poor and oppressed in Capernaum, but too bad for the town where Jesus grew up! No wonder they are angry.

The parallel accounts in Mark (6.1-6) and Matthew (13.53-58) seem to make more sense. They tell us that they *took offence* at him because of what he said in the synagogue. Both Mark and Luke omit the attempted murder and report merely that because of their unbelief Jesus was not able to do many deeds of power there. In contrast, Luke’s version suggests the people of Nazareth believed Jesus could do miracles, and were furious because he rubbed in his intention to do them for others, but not for them.

Maybe Luke, with the accounts in Mark and Matthew in the background, simply leaves out the explicit report that the people of Nazareth were offended and takes it for granted that they were outraged at Jesus for putting himself forward as messiah. But this doesn’t help much. It leaves

us wondering *why* they found his words in the synagogue so offensive. The Greek term we see translated as *taking offense* is the word from which we get the English word *scandalized*. Why would the pious folks of this little town find it scandalous that one of their own claimed to be the anointed savior, assuming that he really was doing the miraculous deeds that supported the astonishing claim?

They might well react negatively to a native son who goes away and then returns, making grandiose claims for himself out of the blue, but they've heard of the amazing things he has done and, to all appearances, believe them. And "*speaking well of him*" doesn't in the least suggest that they saw him as "getting above himself." Why wouldn't they be *proud* if God selected one of their own to at long last deliver Israel from oppression? Isn't it human nature to boost the local boy who makes good, to hope some of the glory rubs off? Think of those tiny towns where as you enter, a sign greets you: "*Welcome to Cowflop, S.D., pop. 867, Home of the annual Turnip Festival and birthplace of _____*" followed by the name of some obscure politician or athlete, onto whose minor fame the obscure hamlet has latched itself.

Matthew and Mark don't supply much of an explanation why Nazareth does not accept Jesus. What I suspect is that Luke tries to offer one by re-writing the story in light of the larger meaning of Jesus' life and work. The fact that Luke takes this story from the other synoptic gospels, where it occurs well into the narrative, and moves it, making it the beginning of Jesus' ministry, signals that we are not to take it as a literal historical account, but instead that he is reworking the narrative of Jesus' life to make a theological point. The fact that the text Luke describes Jesus reading in the synagogue apparently corresponds to no one passage that could have been found in the scrolls, but is a composite of different texts in Isaiah, sends the same message.

The excited townspeople anticipate that their homegrown miracle worker will do even bigger things here in Nazareth than the amazing works they've heard reported from other parts of Galilee. We can imagine them being a bit put out that Jesus has been doing these things over the hills in Capernaum, rather than starting here at home, but they surely aren't expecting the harsh words he has for them. *"No prophet is accepted in his hometown! You think I'm going to feed the hungry and heal the lepers here? No way! Don't even expect me to bring deliverance to Israel. I'm going to be like Elijah, who did God's work not in Israel, but up there in Sidon. I'm going to be like Elisha, who healed not the lepers of Israel, but Naaman, who came down from Syria. I'll go to pagans, to Israel's enemies and oppressors, before I'd do anything here!"*

Jesus' words seem calculated to enrage these people. And they seem so unfair. They're *not* rejecting their prophet...are they? They're embracing him as their own, eager for him to get on with the miracles and God's deliverance. In fact, I hear their, *"This is Joseph's son, isn't it?"* as, *"Hey, he's one of us, isn't he?"* Yet somehow, what looks like accepting Jesus is really rejection, and the fighting words Jesus speaks to his neighbors reveal it. Their response to Jesus' talk of God's grace coming to those foreigners is to try to kill him.

If Mark and Matthew were aware of a story about Jesus narrowly escaping death at the hands of an angry mob of the people he grew up with, it would be remarkable that they do not relate it. Possibly, Luke had access to some independent source for the story of the attempt to hurl Jesus off the cliff, but I assume that the episode is Luke's invention. He assumes the reader will see the story as a literary device, not a report of an historical event. And the theological point of Luke's literary device here is all too obvious: the attempted killing of Jesus by his own people

foreshadows his death at the hands of Israel. Israel's—and the world's—rejection of God's anointed is Nazareth's rejection writ large.

The way they try to kill Jesus is, I think, significant. Why try to throw him off a cliff? The preferred method for doing in blasphemers is stoning. Earlier in this chapter Luke relates Jesus' temptation at the hands the Devil, who first brings him to a high place from which he can see all the world's kingdoms, offering them to him, and later places him atop the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, suggesting he throw himself off to prove he is God's anointed. Jesus rejects these temptations; they represent something that might *look* like Jesus' true mission as the embodiment of God's salvation, but they are false. They substitute all too human notions of what it is to be God's messiah, ideas of power and glory, for the real thing. Here in Nazareth, Jesus is again brought to a high place by those intent on replacing his genuine mission with a fake, something that fits their purposes, but not God's. If Jesus had been driven in the direction his townsfolk wanted him to go he would have forsaken his mission, no less than if he had done as the Devil suggested.

What Jesus sees in the people of Nazareth is the desire to make God's salvation their vindication, the divine seal of approval on their religious beliefs and practices, an affirmation of how specially at long last they deserve God's favor, and with that the exclusion, defeat, and condemnation of their enemies, who deserve nothing but God's wrath. *Their* Jesus the messiah of *their* God who will set things to right: they're all for that. But just as Jesus refuses the temptation to be the sort of messiah the Devil can approve of, he refuses the temptation to be the kind of messiah the upstanding, religiously proper Jews among whom he was raised can approve. Of course what Jesus says makes them crazy.

They've known him for 30 years, but they don't know him. They don't see him; they see their own image. They have their ideas of God, and of the salvation he promises, but it's all a projection of their earnest need to justify themselves. Consider how Jesus escapes: Luke says, "*he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*" It's not very plausible taken literally, but that he can slip away through a crowd out to kill him suggests that they hardly recognize him in the first place, as though they've never really seen him.

When the real God appears, there in the flesh, and refuses to cooperate, talking nonsense about salvation for outsiders, they are murderously angry. This is not a God they recognize. What Mark and Matthew *say*, Luke *shows*: they are offended, scandalized, fighting mad. This is the God they want to kill. This is not, of course, to pin some special obtuseness and wickedness on little Nazareth, or even on Israel at large. The point is that *even* Nazareth, uniquely positioned to know Jesus for who he is, can't help but try to make of him a God in their own image, a God who endorses their ideas of what's just and unjust, a God who rewards the deserving and condemns the undeserving, a God who brings the power and the glory home, where it belongs. When Jesus won't let them, they're ready to throw him off the cliff. The angry people of Nazareth here stand in for all of us. It's not news that the God each of us worships so closely resembles what we most approve of in ourselves. We're on the lookout for a reassuring, but false, god who agrees with us about who deserves what, and acts accordingly, rather than giving in to the true God who tells us to forget all that, to love as recklessly as he loves us and to forgive others as indiscriminately as he forgives us.

The sad fact of the human condition is that when we think we see God, we so often see nothing but ourselves. As I read today's familiar lesson from St. Paul, I realized that I've never really

heard the verse: “*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face*” (1 Cor. 13.12) I’ve always heard this as though it contrasts seeing the other only dimly, as through something that gets in the way, like a dirty window. But that’s not what happens when we look in a mirror. What we see is not someone else in an obscured way, but simply ourselves. We might imagine that we see someone else, God or our neighbor, but it’s just ourselves we see. If we think we see anyone else, that’s kind of pathetic.

When I was an undergraduate, for a time my roommate and I shared our dorm room with a chicken. Prior to this familiar with the chicken only as a menu item, we soon learned that it is not nature’s most intelligent creature. On the door separating our room from the bathroom there was a full-length mirror, which, coming down to the chicken’s level, made it possible for it to see itself. We discovered that if one of us got on the other side of the door and made chicken sounds, the chicken would interact with its reflection endlessly, pecking and clucking at the image, taking its own reflection for another, wonderfully interesting and appealing, chicken. Were our attention spans not shorter than the poor creature’s, I don’t think it would have ever given up on that so attractive bird just out of reach behind the glass.

St. Paul tells us that we’re pretty chicken like, prone to mistake the mere image of ourselves for the other. Prone, that is, to think other things, excellent as they might be, are more important than the unconditional, all-forgiving, utterly inclusive and healing love that comes to us from God. That love we may either reject or accept. But the only way we can accept it is by sharing in it, and that means sharing it, not trying to reserve it for ourselves, and for those we approve of, but receiving it as God’s flagrant salvation of the whole world, despite itself, no holds barred.

Like the angry, self-righteous folk of Nazareth, we can reject God's messiah, pushing him away, nudging him toward the cliff, all the while confident it's God's business we are about. Or we can follow him out of the safe and familiar hometowns of our lives, to strange and distant parts full of strangers who, like us, are fabulously implausible candidates to receive the love of God made flesh in Jesus.

Amen.