

**ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH
COBLESKILL, NY**

January 31, 2010 – EPIPHANY 4 (C)

The Rev. Nina George Hacker

Sermon: “*Just a Hometown Boy?*”

Jeremiah 1:4-10	(The Lord calls Jeremiah to be a prophet)
Psalms 71:1-17	(Recount the mighty deeds of the Lord; take refuge in Him)
1 Corinthians 14:12b-20	(Spiritual gifts are for building up the Church)
St. Luke 4:21-32	(Jesus teaches with authority)

This morning's Gospel picks up where last week's ended. Jesus has finished reading from Isaiah the prophet, and declares: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21). Reports of Jesus' ministry have already spread like wildfire. Some heard God's voice at His baptism! Others who were at the wedding in Cana told everyone far and wide about His changing water to wine! Demons have been cast out. The lame have walked. The sick have been healed. And now, Jesus has been invited back to His hometown church, and accorded the privilege of reading the Holy Scriptures and preaching. Wow! Can you imagine hearing Jesus preach?! They were all ears. Anticipation and expectations were running high. And then, Jesus concludes the reading of the assigned lesson with, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What? No sermon? No signs and wonders? No miracles? Who does this guy think he is? Why, we've known him since he was just a kid. He's Joseph the Carpenter's son. This may simply have been a statement of fact, but Jesus interprets it as a rebuff, and counters with, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown” (v. 24). And then He proceeds to deliver a sermon ... one that the congregation would rather not have heard.

Jesus has already made His point about the Spirit of the Lord anointing Him for prophetic and miraculous ministry. But now He begins talking about God's gracious favor shown to *non-Jewish* people. The Widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Leper were both Gentiles. And yet, God had supernaturally nourished and healed them through His prophets Elijah and Elisha.¹ In using this illustration for his homily, Jesus seems to be saying that He, too, is being sent by God to bring grace and redemption to the Gentiles. Uh-oh. Not a popular message with those Jewish worshippers.

So they become enraged and want to murder the messenger. Jesus escapes from the angry mob because His time has not yet come. For in John 10:18, our Lord says, “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.”

If you think about it, the people of Nazareth are re-enacting what Satan had earlier attempted in the wilderness: “If you are the Son of God, prove it—by my terms!” (Luke 4:1-13). They want Jesus to conform to *their* expectations. They demand miracles, while having little use for the *miracle-worker*.

Like the people of Nazareth, do we, at times, also try to manipulate and limit Jesus? Are we, too, skeptical and demanding? Will we listen to what Jesus has to say to us, even if it what we hear is hard to accept? Or are we too busy telling Our Lord who we think He ought to be, as we pray self-centered prayers and make arrogant demands? If we insist on making God into an image of our own choosing, we repeat the sin of the Israelites' worshipping a golden calf (Ex. 32:4). Note that a calf is a domesticated animal, used in the service of human needs – subservient to people! But worshipping our own domesticated god, is a foolish and self-destructive endeavor.²

So, will we play it safe by placing our faith in a limited god of our own making, bowing down to a golden cow? Or will we step out of our comfort zone to trust and believe in the Lion of Judah? In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*,³ Susan inquires about Aslan, the great and fearsome lion, "Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." [...] "Safe? Said Mr. Beaver ... Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

If Jesus' message is true, it won't always be safe. The Gospel should challenge and, yes, at times, even offend us. Biblical truth wasn't popular in Jesus' day, any more than it is in 2010. The way in which Jesus ultimately fulfilled the Scriptures, the way in which Christ carried out God's will, by dying on the cross for our sins, offends *everybody!* St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:23, that Christ crucified is both "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." The Jews wanted signs and wonders to accompany Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel, and for the philosophy-loving, logic-spouting Greeks, Christ's Cross and Resurrection defied reason. To both groups, a crucified Messiah was nonsense.⁴

Even those of us who have known Jesus all our lives—like the people of Nazareth—can become numb to the awesomeness of "the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). We are in danger of becoming inoculated against the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation. In "The Cotton Patch Gospel," playwright Clarence Jordan writes: "Jesus has been so zealously worshiped, His deity so vehemently affirmed, His halo so brightly illumined, and His cross so beautifully polished, that in the minds of many he no longer exists as a man."⁵

Will we be like the people of Nazareth? Treating Jesus like our hometown boy who ought to do for us whatever we want, because, after all, we're so familiar with each other?

Or will we be like those in Capernaum, where Jesus fled after being rejected and threatened by those who knew Him best? That region of the Galilee became the center of Jesus' ministry.

There, Our Lord cast out demons, healed the sick, taught about the kingdom of God, and preached the good news of salvation, while ministering to Jews and Gentiles alike. Sadly, even after all the amazing work Jesus did in their midst, the citizens of Capernaum rejected Him, too. Jesus ends by cursing the city, saying in Matthew 11:23 (NLT): "you people of Capernaum, will you be honored in heaven? No, you will go down to the place of the dead. For if the miracles I did for you had been done in wicked Sodom, it would still be here today."

On that day long ago in Nazareth, and later, in Capernaum, Jesus evoked many strong emotions: Starting with pride and joy in their hometown hero, and, ending with rage and with anger that could not be ignored.

... How about *your* feelings toward Jesus? When you encounter Jesus, do you feel emotions of pride and joy and amazement? When you encounter Our Lord, does He sometimes make you angry? Has your relationship with Jesus ever made you feel like you are going to burst with joy? Has Jesus ever ticked you off? If you've never experienced any strong feelings about Jesus, pro or con, then I invite you to get to know Him better. Go home and read the Gospel of Mark. It's the shortest and most succinct of the accounts of Jesus' life, and will acquaint you well with the One who is God-with-us.

Put yourself in the story. Experience what it's like to be with Jesus, to hear His teachings and witness His power. You may love Him or hate Him. Embrace Him or shake your fist at Him. But please, whatever you do, you cannot afford to ignore Jesus.⁶

Let us pray:

Dear God, like Jesus' hometown friends, and later, the crowd on Palm Sunday, we too can be fickle in our affection for Your Son. We ask for grace to love Him as He is, and to hear, and faithfully obey what Our Lord commands. Grant that daily we may grow in our knowledge and love of Christ, without Whom we can do nothing, yet through Whom all things are possible.

Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ Elijah and the widow of Zarephath: 1 Kings 17:8; Elisha and Naaman the Syrian: 2 Kings 5:1.

² Church of the Epiphany, February 2007 < http://epiphanycorcoran.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html > 30 January 2010.

³ C.S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, pp. 74-76.

⁴ The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10 "The First Epistle to the Corinthians" (New York: Abingdon) p. 30.

⁵ Joyce Hollyday, Clarence Jordan: Essential Writings (Orbis Books, 2003)

⁶ Adapt. Jeff W. Fisher, "Don't Ignore Him," 28 January 2007.