

## 4 Epiphany (C)

Lk 4.21-30

This is Paul Harvey Sunday: today we hear the rest of the story. Remember Paul Harvey? Some of you do. For those who don't, talk with your grandparents after the service. But for now, let's get to the rest of the story.

You'll remember that in last week's gospel, we heard how Jesus returned from the wilderness filled with the power of the Spirit. He began to teach in the synagogues of Galilee, and everyone thought very well of him. He went to his hometown of Nazareth, where he preached a sermon on a text from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And now today, we get the rest of the story: today's gospel lesson picks up right where last week's gospel ended, but things take a rather dramatic and a rather unexpected turn. At first, everyone speaks well of him, and everyone is impressed by his gracious words. But in less time than it takes to tell, they change their mind: they're filled with rage, and are so angry with him that they not only feel like they want to kill him, they actually try to.

So what happens to make the people change their minds so dramatically and so quickly? The thing Jesus does that gets people so worked up had to do with the two little stories he tells in today's gospel, one story about a poor widow and another story about some Syrian guy named Naaman. Jesus uses both of these stories to make a point about the "year of the Lord's favor" that his listeners aren't expecting.

The first story, the one about the widow of Zarephath, comes from the First Book of Kings (the seventeenth chapter, to be exact). The prophet Elijah has spoken a word of judgment against the house of Israel. Why? Because Israel has betrayed the covenant. Ahab, the king, has taken a foreign wife and is worshipping foreign gods. Ahab allows Israel to observe practices that were forbidden by the law of Moses, up to and including child sacrifice. And Elijah says, "This is wrong. This is not who we are supposed to be. This is not how we are supposed to live." So because he speaks this word of judgment against the king and against the people, Elijah has to flee Israel.

He ends up living in Zarephath, a town lying to the north of Israel between the cities of Sidon and Tyre. This is deep into Gentile territory; Elijah is well beyond the pale here. He can't go back to Israel, because Ahab wants to kill him. Since he is a foreigner in Zarephath, he has nowhere to go. But he finds shelter in the home of a widow and her son, and stays with them throughout the time of his exile. Because of the hospitality they offer to Elijah, God blesses the widow and her son; at one point, Elijah even saves the young boy's life. God's glory is manifest beyond the borders of Israel.

The second story, the one about Naaman the Syrian, is even more to the point and in some respects even more challenging. This story comes the fifth chapter of the Second Book of Kings, and is about Elijah's successor, Elisha. Naaman was a commander of the armies of Syria—Syria

being one of the ancient enemies of Israel—and Naaman was very good at his job. He would lead military raids against neighboring countries, and return home with captives and treasure. Once he led a raid against Israel and captured some Israelites and brought them back to Syria.

Naaman had only one problem: he suffered from leprosy. But one of the people he had kidnapped from Israel worked in his house as a servant, and this servant said, “If only you would go to see the man of God who lives in Israel, he could cure you of your leprosy.” So Naaman goes to see Elisha the prophet, and Elisha tells him, “Wash seven times in the Jordan River, and you will be cleansed.” And Naaman does, and Naaman is: he is healed of his leprosy. When he realizes he’s been cleansed, Naaman says to Elisha, “Now I know there is no god in all the world except the God of Israel.” God’s glory is manifest beyond the borders of Israel.

But Naaman has one other little problem, something else he hopes Elisha can help him with: Naaman has to worship a god he now knows isn’t real. Naaman says to Elisha, “Listen, my master makes me go to his temple and worship his god, and I know now that his god isn’t really a god because the only *real* god is *your* God, the one who healed me, but I’ve got to stay in the good graces of my master. So is it okay if I go with my master to his temple and pretend to worship his god? Is it okay for me to practice idolatry, if I promise to keep my fingers crossed behind my back while I do so?” And Elisha says to Naaman, “Go in peace.”

Now, why would these two stories be so upsetting for the people listening to Jesus in that synagogue in Nazareth? You would think they would like these stories. The God of Israel, vindicated in the sight of the Gentiles, the God of Israel known and worshipped by those outside the covenant. That sounds like it should be good news. But it’s not: “all in the synagogue were filled with rage,” and they “drove him out of the town . . . that they might hurl him off the cliff.”

It would be easy at this point to lay all the responsibility for what happens squarely on the shoulders of the people listening to Jesus. “Well, they were being narrow-minded.” “Well, they were being too judgmental.” “Well, they were being unfaithful.” Some of that is true, but I’m not sure that’s the only thing going on here. If we look closely at this text, I think we have to lay at least some of the responsibility for what happens on the shoulders of Jesus himself.

Because it almost seems as if he goes out of his way to push their buttons. They don’t seem to have any problem with him at first. He was “praised by everyone.” “All spoke well of him and were amazed” at his gracious words. Why not capitalize on this good will? Why not build up the base and mobilize the constituency?

But he doesn’t do that. Right here at the very outset of his ministry, just as he’s starting to make a name for himself, he pushes back. That raises a rather interesting question: why would he do that?

I think the best clue we have for answering that question can be found in the words Jesus speaks to the people about the expectations they have of him. “Doubtless you will say to me, ‘Physician, cure thyself.’ Doubtless you will say to me, ‘Do here in your hometown the things we heard you did in Capernaum.’” The people of Nazareth had heard that Jesus did some pretty cool stuff over there in Capernaum, and they wanted to see it for themselves. “Hey, that sounds

neat; I'd like to see that. Do it again. I heard you helped someone else; how about helping me?"

Jesus pushes back against their expectations because he has already begun to see, even at this early stage in his ministry, that the things the people *want* him to do are quite different from the things he *has* to do. The message they want him to proclaim is quite different from the message he has been given to proclaim. The good news he brings, the deliverance he offers, is not what they're expecting, or even what they're wanting. Their perceived need is not their actual need.

This becomes something of a pattern that continues throughout the ministry of Jesus. When the crowds demand a sign, he refuses; he says, "No sign will be given to this evil and adulterous generation." When the crowds demand bread, he tells them, "You're not here because you believe in me, you're here because you want someone to fill your stomachs." When he gets into an argument with the Pharisees and one of the scribes tries to calm him down, he turns on the scribe and goes after him, too.

Time and again, whenever he's given a chance to dial it back and present his message in a way that's just a little less confrontational, a little less demanding, Jesus goes in the opposite direction and raises the stakes. And pretty much every time he does this, he loses followers; he becomes just a little less popular, a little less respected. By the end of his ministry, people are screaming for his blood.

So what's the Epiphany moment here? How is the glory of God manifest in the world in this story? This morning's gospel shows us that the proclamation of the reign of God, the manifestation of the glory of the Lord, will not always be received as good news. But there's a blessing here, as well, because part of what that tells us is that God is unwilling to compromise his plan of salvation.

We would rather that this salvation thing were something we could negotiate with God: we do this for God, God does this for us, everybody's happy. *Quid pro quo*. That's how things seem to work in most of our relationships: why not our relationship with God?

This week, Jesus reminds us he's not here to negotiate with us. He's not here to meet our expectations, or to satisfy our desires, or to accommodate our illusions. He's here to save us, period. This week we are reminded that we are not in any kind of position to bargain with God.

But that's good news, because God's plan of salvation is so much larger than anything we could possibly imagine. His vision for who we are and who we can become includes so much more than we would ever even *think* to ask. Those in the synagogue at Nazareth thought that the good news was just for them, but Jesus showed them the good news was for them and for people they couldn't imagine would ever be able to receive God's gift of salvation.

For those who are looking for something else, for those determined to negotiate with God, the gospel of Christ is not good news. In fact, it's life-threatening. That's why the crowd in the synagogue at Nazareth wanted to kill him: they recognized he was telling them something that forced them to rethink everything about themselves and the way they lived their lives, and they weren't sure they wanted to do that. Faced with that kind of a message, the only thing they

wanted to do was get rid of him.

But for those who are willing to receive the salvation God gives to us in Jesus, the gospel is very good news indeed, because what it means is that God himself is for us. And if God is for us, who can be against us? As St. Paul put it in his epistle to the Romans, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

That is an essential part of the good news of the gospel: God’s plan of salvation is one that is greater than anything we could ever negotiate ourselves, greater than life, or death, or the past, or the present, or the future, stronger than any power in creation, more true and more good and more beautiful than anything we can imagine. That is the glory that is revealed to us this season; that is the showing forth that is manifest in our awareness of the epiphany of the living Jesus, present here with us today and present everyday to those who abide in him.

But this requires change. It requires us to rethink everything we think we know, everything we think we know about God, and about ourselves, and about the world, and about our friends and neighbors and even about our enemies. God’s plan of salvation requires us to rethink everything because God is determined to save every part of us, not just some parts of us: he’s not just interested in our emotions or our spirits, he’s interested in our minds and our wills and our bodies and our whole lives.

So let us receive all that he has in store for us. Let us hear the word of truth that he speaks to us, and let us accept the gift of new life he offers to us. The Lord himself has proclaimed good news, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, that they might testify to the Lord’s mercy, grace, and power. Today, that proclamation is fulfilled in your hearing. Let us then offer him our lives to be the place in the world where his light is revealed, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

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