

Prophet on the Edge (Luke 4:21-30)
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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; I Corinthians 13:1-13)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/prophet-on-the-edge

Curious ... Where do prophets come from?
What kind of community does it take
to raise prophets from childhood,
prophets like Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, or even Jesus?

In a church like this one, one with a long history, we've watched over the years as the breezes of God have blown among our members who've sensed the calling of God and taken definitive steps towards fulfilling God's call to speak. This is the implicit possibility for every service of worship where the teachings of Christ are lifted up. When we worship, there is always the possibility that one among us may rise up and testify that God has called them to some sacred calling with their lives.

My friend Kyle Childress tells the story of what happened when he was growing up in West Texas as a teenager during the Vietnam War and one of that town's football heroes was drafted and went off to the war in Southeast Asia as a commitment to his country. Kyle remembered him as one of his boyhood idols and felt particularly close to him because that young man had been in his father's Sunday School class before going to war. The young man was wounded in the war and discharged and came home a hero. While one leg was lost in fierce fighting, the young man came home with a message. "God told me," he claimed, "the war was wrong and that his church and town should change their hearts and minds about racial segregation." Some in the community said the war messed up his head. Others said this or that about him, but one Sunday, Kyle's father commented to his mother he didn't know whether the young man had mental problems or not but that didn't mean he was wrong. It wasn't long before Mr. Childress, a member of the school board, pushed for integration.

Had the story in Luke stopped with Jesus' reading the scroll from Isaiah 61 and had Jesus been content to simply make his one-line pronouncement that this scripture was being played out before their eyes, I think it would have been an ideal launch pad for the rest of the story.

But you can't put a big bow on his trip home because the goodness of the story is spoiled when Jesus poked a hole in their idea of religious nationalism, (an insipid form of patriotism propped up with faith). When "God bless America," becomes code language that God blesses America more fully than God blesses everyone else, you have religious nationalism. It's neither patriotism or faith.

In other words, Jesus couldn't just read the scripture and bless it with an affirmation about his own calling. He took a risk and spoke prophetically. He meddled with their religious ideas and broke ranks with their Jewish understanding of their exclusive covenant with God. And for that they threatened to kill him.

There's a real danger in preaching a message that stirs the bottom of the pot of acceptable ideas. Walter Brueggemann, scholar of the prophets used a phrase that indicated the prophet challenged the sanctity and safety of what he called, "the settled reality."

Here's the general rule: When the prophets speak about the past or the future, only a few are ever upset. But IF the prophet speaks about the present, the lions in the room come alive. It was true in the days of the prophets, it was true in Jesus' day, and it's true today.

In his opportunity to read from the scriptures Jesus chose this passage from Isaiah 61 and with it he made a self-statement to his home congregation that clearly declared to all of them just what kind of person he had become. He wanted his hometown community to know he was making a break from the settled reality and that his life was headed in a new direction.

He made the words of Isaiah his own: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he chose me to go and preach the good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (Luke 4:18-19, NRSV)

Jesus read the words from Isaiah then he silently rolled the scroll back up and handed it to the attendant who solemnly made sure the scroll was put back into its container. All eyes were fixed on Jesus who sat quietly until the attendant sat back down. Then, in a measured way of speaking, Jesus straightforwardly announced, *"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Jesus' first sermon among his own kin received an evocative response: Some were filled with open admiration ... some wondering ... some doubting. Jesus provoked an angry response by quoting two well-known proverbs: *"Physician, heal thyself"* and, *"No prophet is acceptable in his own country"* His words were electric. The words from Isaiah spoke of an anointing by the Spirit, the work of a prophet, and dramatic signs of God's redemption.

Jesus defended himself by referencing two Old Testament stories. Elijah and Elisha, prophets in Israel, took God's favor to non-Jews. Remember Elijah? He was one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets. But whom did he feed in a time of great famine? No one from Nazareth or Jerusalem or even Capernaum. Instead, he fed a widow in Zarephath, a small village in Lebanon. Even today one cannot travel to Lebanon if there's an Israeli border crossing cited in your passport. *Even today ...*

Remember Elisha? Elisha was everyone's miracle worker. Did he heal anyone from Israel, the Northern Kingdom? No, Jesus reminds them that the only leper he healed was Naaman the

Syrian. Not only that but Naaman was an enemy army commander. Couldn't Elisha heal someone from Israel's army?

To be honest, the tension that erupted was not between Jesus and Judaism; it was between Judaism and its own sacred stories. Jesus' point? The Israelites should have heard Jesus' message and accepted the truth of it. Israel knew God's grace toward all peoples as early as the covenant with Abraham. They knew it but they refused to make it so.

Consequently, their very own Jewish Scriptures caught Jesus' family and friends on the horns of a dilemma. They read the scriptures as the exclusive word of God to them only ... as an exclusive covenant with them. Jesus as a prophetic voice of provocation couldn't let that idea go unchallenged and so the subtext to the reading of his inauguration text from Isaiah 61, he drew the line in the sand that he would not be associated with that kind of exclusive form of love. He understood his mission clearly and did not flinch from the political fallout that came from his first encounter of substance.

Jesus was too dangerous to ignore and considered a political and theological threat to the settled realities of his time. They carried him up to the brow of the nearest hill and threatened him with death. [*Show picture - That hill today is obvious for those who visit Nazareth – it is a wicked hill covered with jagged rocks. You might not die from the fall, but no doubt your body would be emphatically broken, maybe enough to teach you a lesson.]

Facing peril, Jesus mustered the energy to walk between the crowd to go on his own. He walked between them and thus avoided the binary trap. He proved he was not pro-Jew and anti-Samaritan. He was not pro-Zarephath and anti-Nazareth. He wasn't a supporter of any political party. He wasn't a Republican nor was he a Democrat. Jesus was not a Lutheran or a Baptist or even a Christian for that matter. He wasn't contained or hemmed in by any singular identify.¹ This incident is thus a prelude, a foreshadowing, of how they would get rid of him on Golgotha.

The God-called prophets always see things the rest of us don't see. Like Jesus, the role of the prophet is to simply speak the words God puts in their mouths. Jesus pointed his friends and family to a world called the Kingdom of God and it cost him his life.

Hmm ... Maybe this explains why numerous times in his ministry, Jesus muttered under his breath: *"For those who have ears to hear..."* The prophet could never tell for sure whether those who heard him were listening or not. At least not until they tried to kill him.

Amen.

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¹ Adapted from "Living the Word," Katie Hines-Shah, *Christian Century*, 1/12/22

