

“The Church Won’t Ever Be Like It Was – For Eternity!”  
+ 4 Epiphany C+  
Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30  
January 31, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of ministry in the church since the children of Israel first gathered in the tabernacle that this building is modeled after is outlined in the Gospel for today. No, not every preacher has faced being thrown off a cliff though I’m sure there are people wherever I’ve ministered who have longed to take me to a precipice – it comes with the calling. What Jesus was facing was the age old question, “Why can’t it be the way it used to be? Or the sister question, “Why can’t the church/God/things be the way **I** want?” And Jesus answers with exactly the words that no one wanted to hear, “It never was that way.” And then He gave them examples.

Talk about fighting words – the next thing Jesus knows He’s being herded out to a cliff! Well, not exactly right away. To fill in the “back story” 2000 years ago, when Jesus returned as a hometown hero and healer to Nowhere Nazareth He went to the synagogue “as was His custom” (we read elsewhere – the one man who never needed to go to church made it His custom and went). Favorite son He unrolls the scroll handed to Him by the synagogue attendant, finds an appropriate passage from Isaiah, reads it to the men gathered there (sorry, no women allowed in the synagogue), carefully rolls the scroll back together, hands it back to its keeper, sits down (because that’s how one preached back then) and preaches what surely must be one of the shortest sermons on record, 9 words, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”. No wonder every congregation since has hoped and prayed for a preacher “just like Jesus.” Well, His a “knock-em-dead” sermon nearly got Him “knocked dead” as the people angrily responded, “Who’s that?” “Who said that?” “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

You see, it was the custom in small Galilee villages that you took care of your own – you saw first to the needs of your “kin-family” – the people in your village who were, more likely than not, related to you by marriage – and certainly by your own local customs. They were expecting Jesus, the famous winemaker who had made 500 gallons out of water just a few miles away to do even more for them. They weren’t going to acknowledge Him as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy just by His saying so – “SHOW ME THE MIRACLES!” “DO WHAT WE/WHAT I EXPECT!” That is behind their angry questioning of “Who are you/who do you think you are?!”

To think He had started a riot with the words of Isaiah who made a promise - an “as-God-is-my-witness” promise that one day, when God’s promised One appeared, Israel would know it by the signs He did among them. The deaf would hear; the lame would walk, the blind would get back their sight; the poor and oppressed would finally catch a break and get some good news. Isaiah’s was a promise Israel clung to. But to tell the truth, it was not their favorite promise. Their favorite promise also came from the scroll of Isaiah where they were the poor and oppressed and the good news they would get would come in the form of wealth willingly

surrendered to them and where their enemies would grovel before them and become their servants.

This was the promise of heaven on earth: where all Israel was at peace, sipping Manishevitz out on the patio while their former captors worked the fields and cultivated the vineyards and stomped the grapes and did the chores and cleaned the house and mucked out the stables because, as the oppressed and downtrodden children of Israel and these Nazareth nobodies read Isaiah, when the Messiah came, it was payback big time.

But Jesus slides past all of that and turns them back to the truly outcast (including the beggars unfit to mingle with the godly in the synagogue) and in nine words leaves them speechless. Knowing what is in their hearts – their desire for Him to do the miracles they desired and make the church/their nation/their lives just like they had them pictured Jesus adds the proverb about the “doctor, curing himself.”

Then the fight begins. “No prophet,” He said “is accepted in His hometown” - being God’s people has never been about things being as they were or as you want them and it has always been about other people – people out there – people you don’t want to look at and people you don’t want to welcome.

Throwing caution to the wind Jesus brings up Elijah being sent to a widow in Sidon and Naaman the leper from Syria being healed by Elisha. Not exactly fighting words for you and me, perhaps, but suppose we grab that and haul it into the present. How do you feel about God apparently preferring the poor, not the well-off; but the weak, not the strong; the guilty, not the godly, the stranger not the friend, the grubby, not the great? Why do the Muslim Arabs have fabulous wealth why so many, even in this church, are unemployed? Why are Hindu children from India where they just keep having babies they can’t afford flown over here for miraculous operations while millions in the US don’t even have health care insurance. I won’t try to guess anymore at any person’s personal prejudice against some other group or nationality but I think you get the point.

With God right in front of them telling them God wasn’t going to do things quite the way they had in mind they decide to throw God off a cliff. They wanted what they’d imagined –they wanted a recreation of the past when Israel had been the top nation under Kings David and Solomon. And they didn’t want God to be God if that wasn’t what they were going to get.

They didn’t want to consider that God gives good things where God wills – to those in the family of faith and those who are far away and quite different. You see, the Gospel is an odious offense, a screaming scandal to those who have no use for the freedom it really gives – freedom to go in faith to the ends of the earth which might be right at your door as it is here in St. Paul. Through the Holy Spirit, by faith we are freed to look outward at those who have not yet heard of Jesus, who have not yet seen what difference the love of God shown to us in Christ Jesus – those lost and far from God who need the Savior, the Messiah God sent and will not hear if we do not look outward – reach outward!

The hardest part of ministry for this or any pastor is to keep people turned out – reaching out – willing to sacrifice, to pay a price, to risk – to go to places that are uncomfortable, to let go of what the church was so that the Gospel can be lived out powerfully NOW and into the future. This past week I talked to a number of pastors about this. I called my friend Bill who started a church 15 years ago from scratch out in Virginia and now has 900 people each Sunday. He said, “All I ever hear are people who want the church to be the way it used to be.” “But your church is only 15 years old!” I countered. “Oh, they want the church to be the way their church was back home – the way they remember it.” Truth is, remembering the church of the past is often like remembering your children when they were young or, though I’ve never been through it, labor. You block out much of the pain!

Talking to my brother, Dave, in New York where his neighborhood and church population changes every few years he said, “I have members who have been here 18 months who complain, ‘Who are these new people and why should we change the church for them?’ New people! I tell them. You’re all new people (indeed, I’ve always said each week we’re a different worshiping group, if we’re honest).” My brother concluded by saying, “Every couple of months I have to turn my congregation OUTWARD again so ministry can happen.”

Is Jehovah ready to be turned outward? Are you ready to look at our neighbors in this neighborhood – your neighbors on your block because, if you think of it, you’re willing to drive from wherever you live, they could, too. Are we willing to address community needs? Are we willing to make changes in how we gather, when we gather to worship?

I’ll stop now before the angry mob comes up to take me out of the pulpit – but think about it. What does it mean for a church to live in the now with an eye for the future – what kinds of ministries should this incredible facility support, how can we dream – looking outward and reaching outward – and what can God accomplish through us? Those are important questions because this church, God’s church won’t ever be like it was because, like God the church IS – it’s NOW – it’s for eternity and just imagine - in the glories of heaven people from all nations, from every tribe, of every color will be worshiping God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in splendor we cannot fathom. May we turn outward and proclaim the Good News Gospel that more will hear, and see, and come! AMEN

Now may our almighty and ever-living God increase in us His gifts of faith, hope and love that, loving what He commands, we may obtain all that He has promised.