

4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C: 3 February 2013

A good storyteller always sets up her story.
She gives us the background—writers call it “the setting”—
and she lets us know where she is coming from,
her bias, her perspective, her angle—writers call this “the voice.”
This is all conveyed to us, the readers, so that,
by the time an action takes place in the story, we have—unconsciously perhaps—
an opinion about the characters and the situation in which they find themselves.
A good storyteller draws us in as she places one block upon another,
as she builds her story, and she places us
as interested observers in the midst of things.
A good storyteller, with a word or two, can remind us on page 85
of the things she’s shared with us on page two.

The author of Luke is a master at this.
Take today’s story, or as I call it from the way our lectionary divides it,
“The Sermon at Nazareth: Part 2.”
If we assume that the report spreading about Jesus
includes all the things recounted in Mark,
Jesus is on a real roll with his ministry.
Just the day before he raised a young girl from the dead.
The day before that he cured a woman the community considered terminally unclean.
The day before that he healed a man possessed by demons.
Now he comes home to Nazareth.

As we know from last week, Jesus attends his local synagogue,
where he reads out a text from Isaiah about being anointed by God
to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, and to liberate the oppressed.
In essence, everything that Jesus has already been doing.
The story says that Jesus reads all those things and then announces,
“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,”
and then it tells us that the people listening were impressed,
because...I mean, really...here’s this local boy, somebody they’ve known all his life,
reading Torah like he knows what he’s talking about.

So far so good, but when that same young man reminds his synagogue audience
that God’s mercy and liberation and healing are meant for everyone
and not just the descendants of Abraham, the mood of the crowd gets ugly.
Who is this rude and precocious young punk,
standing up to read like he knows something?
Get him out of here. Pitch him off that cliff.
Who does he think he is, anyway?

Pitch him off the cliff?

Isn't that a little extreme?

What is going on here?

The genius of storytelling, for one thing.

If we turn back 30 years, if we read the first four chapters of Luke in one sitting, we'd recall a detail from chapter two that the author plays on today in chapter four.

In chapter two, Luke sets a scene at the Jerusalem Temple.

Jesus is eight days old, and his parents have brought him to the Temple to be circumcised and named.

Waiting in the wings is a holy man named Simeon, and he spies the infant Jesus.

He takes the baby in his arms and says,

"This child is going to be a light not only to Israel but to the Gentiles and to all the nations of the world."

Here's the whole program of Jesus, long before he claims it for himself—

God's love is for the whole world, no exceptions.

We, the readers, should be prepared for what Jesus says, even if the Nazareans have not.

One of the commentaries I consulted this week emphasized that in telling this story, the preacher can't overdo the degree of rage the Nazareans feel as Jesus shares the second half of his message.

It might seem a puzzle to us, but imagine if

I proclaimed that the gift of the Kingdom of God would mean, for example, the healing of the Benghazi terrorists or Bashar-al Assad of Syria?

In other words, that whoever is defined as an enemy of the nation is the one who is to be the preferred recipient of God's grace and healing.

Would you be offended? Why?

Because what Jesus proclaims is a new kingdom of peace and reconciliation—an end to the cycle of vengeance and the establishment of a new government based on grace and truth and reaching out to one's enemies.

Welcome, my friends, to the Gospel according to Luke.

Now you know both the setting and the voice.

What do you hear?

The story is written out plainly for us,

but I often think that we haven't read it carefully enough.

If we good Christian churchgoers only consider Jesus

our personal teacher, our savior and our friend,

and forget that he is a prophet who calls us unceasingly

to work for healing, liberation, and justice,

then we really aren't listening to him at all.

Jesus doesn't know how to be a back-yard kind of prophet,
an under-contract kind of Messiah.
I don't think the concept of "those other people," is even in his dictionary.
In Luke, Jesus is a prophet who heals not only us, but "those other people" too.
Especially "those other people."
That pagan widow and that foreign leper
are symbolic reminders that God is not merely our God.
God is the God of illegal immigrants, and the uninsured poor;
God is the God of the people who have no voice and no hope
and no tools for self-betterment.
For Luke, the whole point of prophecy is to lead us toward healing,
the healing of our bodies, our psyches,
our relationships with one another, our planet, and with God.

It is easy to disregard prophecy,
and to pretend that there are no prophetic voices currently speaking to us
because this is not the kind of thing we regularly talk about
in a middle class educated church.
Prophecy is for the fundamentalists; it's for the charismatics, and the Pentecostals—
all the things we are not.
People who speak out against sick and unjust social systems
may indeed be uttering something prophetic, they may be speaking the heart of God,
but we often dismiss these messengers as radicals, or tree-huggers, or idealists.

Prophets make us uncomfortable: they point out to us
that there is no end to the human need that surrounds us,
and they remind us there is no one to address this need but ourselves.
We don't listen because we don't want to have to do anything.
If we can convince ourselves that the messenger is nuts,
then so must the message be also.
We are worshippers in the temple who refuse to see
the God who stands in front of them,
who do not understand that the one who began the story is still speaking.

So it was for the people of Nazareth, Jesus' neighbors and family members:
they never really gave him a chance.
They had already formed their opinions of him before he opened his mouth.
They thought they knew how the story ended and
stopped listening before they ever really started.
Shame on them and their lack of faith.

Of course it is very different for us.
We would never ever do that.
Right?