

EPIPHANY IV

"Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" ...When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Luke 2:23 ff

This Gospel continues the account we heard last week of Jesus' first public teaching. Last week's story was triumphal: Jesus quotes from Isaiah about his mission to alleviate suffering and free captives. His debut consists of resounding inspiration, a call to action, and a ringing assurance that the promises of Hebrew Scripture are being fulfilled.

Today's narrative—a continuation of last week's—is a bit less elevated. Jesus is preaching and teaching in Nazareth, in the town and in the synagogue where he was brought up. And this community of his friends and neighbors is upset and irritated at the news that he has been performing healings elsewhere, namely in Capernaum, a town, likely, with a heavily non-Jewish population. *We want ours*, they demand. *Do the same for us*.

Jesus retorts with his well-known rejoinder: *No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown*. The gospels will recount elsewhere that Jesus can do healing miracles everywhere but in his hometown, because the people who have known him forever don't have faith in him.

Jesus goes on to remind his hearers that Elijah and Elisha, great prophets of Hebrew Scripture, also ministered to non-Jews. At this, the crowd become truly incensed, and drive Jesus out of town toward a cliff over which they plan to hurl him. But he escapes somehow, and goes on his way.

Now this, in a nutshell, is the story of Jesus' entire ministry. He tells people things they don't want to hear, and he arouses their ire and animosity. And with every challenge to the customary practices and received wisdom of the day, his situation becomes more perilous. The authorities feel increasingly threatened and provoked, they grown increasingly angry and adversarial, and, well, we all know the eventual outcome: arrest, conviction, torture, and ugly painful death.

Jesus begins as he means to go on: preaching discomfiting truths, reminding folks of the radical hopes and warnings of their religious tradition, demanding a return to the heart of Jewish commitment to justice and compassion. He never deviates from his central message. And that message never ceases to enrage the powerful, the entrenched, and the compromised among his listeners. As the disciples comment occasionally, *these are hard sayings indeed*.

But speaking of the disciples, the ones closest to Jesus; Jesus subjects them, as well, to a continual stream of teachings, demands, and prophecies that confuse, alarm, and anger them as well. Most of the time they don't understand, and don't like, what they hear from Jesus on the first iteration. They question him repeatedly, and seem sometimes to be on the verge of open rebellion. But you know what? They never leave him. They stick around, they do their best to follow out his instructions.. Jesus is their leader, and ultimately they trust and follow him. They remain incredibly loyal, with one notable exception, up until the very end

I was struck, recently, by a comparison I read between President Obama's relationship with Congress and that of Lyndon Johnson. The commentator pointed out that Obama has actually accomplished more, legislatively, in his first year, than Johnson, who was known to be genius at getting legislation passed. But then someone was quoted to this effect: *Obama is great at getting people to do what they want to do. Johnson was great at getting people to do what they didn't want to do.*

Johnson was great at getting people to do what they didn't want to do. That's a sign of truly extraordinary leadership ability. Jesus has that ability as well, certainly with his disciples if not with the people of his hometown or with the authorities. But the disciples were his disciples, I believe, because they grasped, however imperfectly, that at some fundamental level Jesus was calling on them to do what God required for the transformation of the world.

Another parallel between Jesus and Lyndon Johnson was this: they recognized that their demands – their unpopular demands – had steep costs. Now don't get me wrong, Lyndon Johnson was no Jesus. And I was no fan of Johnson's during his lifetime: he was despised by my generation of progressive young people, growing up, idealistically, in the 1960's. We held him responsible for the on-going war in Vietnam and were delighted when he decided not to run for a second term.

But Lyndon Johnson was responsible for the passage of civil rights legislation that represents one of the major advancements in social justice in America in the 20th century

– or probably any century. It was Johnson’s supreme political genius and complete personal commitment that made possible passage of the civil rights bill, and Johnson knew that that victory did not come cheap. “It will cost us the South,” he famously said, *we* being the Democratic Party, and he was prophetically correct.

Uttering hard sayings, getting people to do what they don’t want to do, and recognizing that taking a strong stand for progress and justice always has a cost – these are some signs of strong and authentic leadership. Jesus exemplifies them. And as he points out, *Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown*. So much for the glamour and rewards of being up high and out front – and we know how Jesus ended up.

What does it mean that President Obama’s popularity is dropping in this country, while around the world he’s a revered and respected figure? Do we here have it right, because we have a closer view of him? Or are we angry because he’s not telling us what we want to hear? He says he’d rather be a good one-term president than a lousy two-term, but I suspect that if he’s going to go down in history as an ambitious leader who accomplished much, in the tradition of Lyndon Johnson, Obama’s going to have to tell us many more unpleasant truths before he’s through.

And the question is, how will we respond? Because, my friends, we are accountable for our own reactions to what our leaders tell us and require of us. Those who heard Jesus’ first teaching in the synagogue had a choice: they could respond with eager hope and a renewed zeal to work toward God’s vision of justice and mercy, or they could become enraged at the one who called them to reform and new life, and try to throw him off a cliff.

I’m afraid it’s all too easy to project all our hopes and fears, all our uncertainty, discontent, and anger, on to those who lead us. It’s so tempting, and so much easier than looking in to our own hearts and consciences and taking responsibility for the changes we know are necessary.

The Jews of Jesus’ time were expecting a messiah who would lead them to military triumph and supremacy in the Middle East. Many who voted to elect Mr. Obama expected, I am afraid, that he would accomplish sweeping changes almost overnight, and almost single-handed. These are impossible expectations, and while we may acknowledge that in our minds, and may pay lip service our common responsibility to work for change, all too often we lay our impatience, our disappointment, and our anxiety all on the shoulders of our leaders.

I offer these reflections on leadership and its hazards as we are about to elect, at our annual meeting, the officers and vestry who will serve as our leaders for the coming year. The people stepping into these roles, like the people who have completed their terms, are deserving of our deep gratitude and appreciation. They have, and they will, work long and hard and sacrificially for our common good.

Their work – our work – as leaders will not be perfect. We will not always do everything right; in fact, we will not always *do* everything, because there's simply too much work for a small group to accomplish. You may not like what we tell you, always. We are facing a daunting year ahead, with a deficit budget, a shortfall in pledging, ever-expanding programs and demand for use of our space, and buildings that are quite literally tumbling apart around us.

But I have confidence— based on years of working with splendid vestries here at St. John's— I have confidence that the folks we elect today will work incredibly diligently, thoughtfully, and faithfully, on behalf of our community. They will need and deserve your support, your help, your involvement, your gratitude, every step of the way.

So, let's do our best to prove Jesus wrong in this instance. Let's commit ourselves to give the leaders and prophets in our midst the honor they richly merit, and let us express that honor not only in our hearts and with our lips but with our hands, as we join together to accomplish God's work in the world, here, now, today.

Alleluia! Amen

