

# Sermon: Epiphany 4

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Year C

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

In the Gospel of Matthew... Jesus says... *Beware of false prophets... who come to you in sheep's clothing... but inwardly are ravenous wolves... you will know them by their fruits... are grapes gathered from thorns... or figs from thistles... in the same way... every good tree bears good fruit... but the bad tree bears bad fruit...* and according to Galatians 5... the fruits of the Spirit are joy... peace... patience... kindness... generosity... faithfulness... gentleness... self-control... and love...

And as we just heard in 1 Corinthians... without love... even if we have prophetic powers... understand all mysteries... and understand all knowledge... and even if we have enough faith to move mountains... without love... we are nothing...

So what it is to be a prophet... The Rev. Martin Smith wrote... *prophets take their stand... where God's incandescent and holy love... meets human resistance...* let me read that again... *prophets take their stand... where God's incandescent and holy love... meets human resistance...* and so why do prophets resist taking a stand... or speaking... and why do others... resist listening...

God knew Jeremiah before Jeremiah was formed in the womb... and consecrated him before he was born... and appointed him to the nations... and yet Jeremiah said... *Truly... I don't know how to speak... I'm only a boy...* so maybe prophets resist... because they think they must come up with their own words... come up with their own script... perhaps prophets resist because they think they must possess the kind of eloquent speech that the world values... the kind of authority the world values... instead

of speaking with God's authority... perhaps prophets resist because they think they must have the kind of experience that the world values...

But Fr. Smith wrote... that *experience*... usually means little more... than that you've been initiated into the values of an unjust order... a prophet must therefore be dis-embedded from their culture... [must exist on the margins...] in order to address that culture with God's authority... in other words... you must be able to say that the Emperor has no clothes... you must be able to name the sacred cows...

And as Jesus said in Matthew 16:3... *You must know how to interpret the appearance of the sky... and the signs of the times*... so maybe some people are able to look to the horizon and tell if a rainstorm is coming... but really don't want to see... really don't want to understand... what's as clear as a bell... to a blind man...

When scripture was written... there were no newspapers... no television... no radio... no internet... no social media... no email flooding our Inboxes... that keeps coming and coming even when we unsubscribe... right... and so these days... especially these days... it can be maddening... to sort through all the voices... of those who claim to be prophets... and so we can ask... do they have love...

This week... Jesus is... again... at home... our Gospel lesson depicts him reading... by the way... this is the only place in scripture where Jesus is portrayed as reading... and we may wonder whether it was unusual for someone who spoke Aramaic... to also be able to read Hebrew... but the synagogue had no official readers... any competent man was allowed to read... and we don't know whether Jesus asked for the scroll of Isaiah... or whether that's just what happened to be handed to him... but those in the synagogue... were faced with an irony they didn't yet understand... The Word was reading the word... and when he sat down to preach... he said *Today... this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*...

Preaching professor Cleophus LaRue... [who teaches at Princeton University...] wrote... Jesus takes this oft-repeated promise from Isaiah... and brings it into nowness... today... [but] sometimes it's dangerous to do things now... if Jesus had only said someday... tomorrow... after a while... by and by... or in the not-too-distant future... he could have pacified the people in their disappointment about where... and to whom... he has been sent to minister... but when he says today... this is my mission and my ministry... he draws a line in the sand and provokes a response... because people often respond in surprising ways... when they sense that you are serious about what you plan to do... and when you plan to do it...

Remember... Luke's Gospel is not directed toward the Jewish people... but toward Gentiles... and those in the synagogue... those who were not able to... or who did not want to... see the signs of the times... could not see that Jesus came for ALL people... could not see that Jesus obliterated tribal boundaries... which they believed afforded... or protected... tribal superiority... and that's why they were so furious when he told them that it was only with outsiders... only with pagan foreigners... only with those the Jews considered unclean... that Elijah and Elisha had success in healing... *what about us... don't you love us too... yes... but you cannot restrain the abundance that I bring... the love... the healing... the forgiveness... the reconciliation... that comes through me from my Abba... knows no limits...*

Those in the synagogue... those who knew Jesus as the small town boy who made good... may have wanted to improve their own standing by associating with him... may have thought that the relationship they had with Jesus the child... entitled them to something special from Jesus the adult...

Fr. Mike Kinman wrote... we talk about a personal relationship with Jesus all the time... we talk about the importance of a personal commitment to following Jesus and putting Christ at the center of our life... but for us... too... there is a double-edged sword with the concept of a "personal Jesus" ... one the people in Nazareth discover in this

Gospel... Jesus bids us follow him... but we cannot own Christ... Jesus is nobody's "own personal Jesus..." But we do that... don't we... it's the George Washington Slept Here phenomenon... where we try to leverage something we had nothing to do with... to benefit our tribe... Jesus... help me make that touchdown... and let the other team lose...

Perhaps people resist listening to prophets... because people can be judgmental... unforgiving... and condemning... and the word of God which comes through prophets... may elicit in them... the fear that God will be judgmental... unforgiving... and condemning towards them... perhaps people resist listening to prophets... because prophets are like God's whistleblowers... calling not only individuals... but whole nations to account... for their sins of omission and commission... and corporate sin requires corporate repentance... like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did in South Africa...

Bp. Satterlee reminds us that there is more Grace than we think there is... and it may go to some people who we don't think deserve it... it makes us uncomfortable... and it was this discomfort that sent Jesus to the cross... but Grace is bigger than we think it ought to be... we expect to be comfortable... we expect things not to change... and it makes us angry when things... including the church... change... and are other than we think they ought to be... it makes us uncomfortable and angry... enough to throw Jesus off the brow of a hill... but that doesn't happen today... it's the only thing in this story... that waits for another day... and so Jesus' ministry and purpose... pass right through the crowd... as he makes his way towards Jerusalem... but this day... today... we can choose to begin speaking God's words... with God's authority... like Jeremiah did... we can reject the values of an unjust order... and can stand with those at the margins... because truly... our lack of experience... is really experience enough...

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