

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, 28.i.2007
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
10:00 a.m., Holy Eucharist, LBW Setting 2
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come. ✠ Amen.

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

--Luke 4:21-24

~~~~~The oral presentation of today's sermon begins on page 10.~~~~~

[When taking one of my theology classes at Saint Peter's College on a field trip to a Conservative Jewish Synagogue one Saturday morning, I gained an insight into the setting in life of today's Gospel. While the service was beginning up front, at the Bema, and as

the Cantor intoned the invitations to prayer, with the congregants praying out loud, but each at his own speed while finishing each prayer more or less together, the President of the Synagogue, moved around the room to greet people personally and to 'shmooze' a little. He, the Rabbi and the Cantor had already met our group before the service. The Cantor had welcomed us warmly before the whole congregation. One Catholic co-ed in our group had brought her Jewish boyfriend along. The President worked his way over toward us during the opening prayers, and invited the young man to read one of the readings from the Hebrew scrolls. The President put his arm across the young man's shoulder and led him forward. He provided him with a prayer shawl, as an attendant

opened a scroll for him on the Bema from which he read in Hebrew with what seemed great facility. Jesus Sabbath visit to the Synagogue in Nazareth and His reading from the scroll of Isaiah that day must happened in somewhat the same way, except that, in Jesus' case, He seems to have been invited beforehand. The fact that He 'sat back down' indicates that He had a seat of honor. Such seats, for the Rabbi, the President [and nowadays the Cantor] and for special guests, are seats of honor. Jesus was a guest of honor in His home Synagogue, invited to read and comment of the Sacred text one very special Sabbath day.]*

*Bracketed text not included in oral presentation.

[What *happened* in today's Gospel? What in the world *happened* here?! Jesus evidently read the Scripture from Isaiah 'as though He wrote it,' so to speak. He read the Scripture with authority, with an authority unusual in such a young person. But, it pleased them. It made them feel proud that He had grown up among them, that He was one of them, and it made them glad that He had been invited to read in the synagogue that Sabbath.]*

[And then, just as the people are murmuring their admiration, Jesus drops the proverbial bomb. He puts words in their mouths. He accuses them of rejecting Him, while pretending to admire Him, and He incites a riot. No wonder we will meet

His mother and kinsmen later as they attempt to bring Him home, convinced that He is out of His mind. Imagine how shocked and humiliated His mother, Mary, and His half-brother or cousin, James, must have felt! What had Jesus done?]*

[All we have before our eyes are letters and words on a page. What was the living context of that sermon in Nazareth, Jesus first sermon in His earthly ministry, His first and last sermon given from the bema of His home synagogue in His home town? The people had *said* not one word, except to praise Him. What had *Jesus* said before that, before the riot started that nearly cut His life short before its time? Jesus had proclaimed to *them* the restoration of sight to the blind, the healing of the deaf, the liberation of

prisoners and slaves and the oppressed. He had said this to *them*, to His own kin, to His neighbors and perhaps to His old friends, and He intuitively sensed their reaction to this.]*

[Had Our Lord preached the Prophet Isaiah's proclamation of healing to the lepers that lived outside of Nazareth and every town and village in Israel, had He preached the recovery of sight to the morally blind tax collectors or prostitutes that were a corrupt part of a corrupt society, had He proclaimed the liberty of a captive nation and the terrible Year of the LORD to the Romans and their Herodian lackeys, He would have caused no offense at Nazareth. That would have been fine. It would have been good news—or news of foreboding—for somebody *else*, and

that would have alright, even admirable, if more than a little idealistic. But, His own kin and townsmen expected that of Him as a young man, still unmarried and with little knowledge of the world. But, He proclaimed Isaiah's words to *them*, and that was unforgivable.]*

[They did not want to be healed. Were *they* lepers? They did not want to have their ears opened. Were *they* deaf, deaf to God's Word? They had built the Synagogue at Nazareth so that God's Word could be read, studied, taught, preached and heard with ever deeper understanding. They did not want to be set free. Were *they* slaves? Despite the Romans, they were as free as they needed to be. Life was hard, but they were comfortable with it, and they

were Hebrews and slaves to no one, not since Moses brought them out of Egypt. And, anyway, *who was He to say these things to them?!* Was Jesus not the son of Mary and Joseph (or at least the son of Mary and 'someone')? They could not hear Jesus' message of the Kingdom of Heaven. This was only too evident to Jesus, precisely because He knew them, precisely because He had always known them. And so, Jesus spoke what they both knew, and they hated Him for it, at least on that awful day.]*

[Remarkably, there are Christians in Nazareth today, though their numbers are dwindling as they find themselves caught between Muslim political and terrorist organizations and the Jewish State. There are Christians in Nazareth, most of them descendants

of either the Crusaders or of the Greek and Armenian and Syrian Christians whose Churches have been there since the earliest days of Christianity. This means that there are now people in Nazareth who can hear that *they* need to be freed and cleansed from sin without trying to kill the messenger of that news. This means also that they have ears and eyes that are open to the Good News of *Gospel* beyond that shocking news, that reality therapy of God's of *Law*. There are those in Nazareth today who thank the Holy Spirit and the Church for speaking to them honestly, for disturbing them in any false comfort and self-delusion into which they have lapsed, for waking them up from a spiritual slumber that leads only to death. And, so, there are those in Nazareth today who are also able to hear

God's promise of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ, those who are able to believe that Isaiah's prophecy really is fulfilled among them with each Eucharist, who receive that promise with their mouths and spirits for their salvation and who live out that grace in lives of mercy and compassion toward others.]*

How do we hear the preaching of God's Word? What do we expect to hear? What does Christ expect us to hear? What does the Holy Spirit enable us to hear? These questions come straight at us from today's Gospel.

How do we hear Jesus' message, not in Nazareth of Galilee but in Brogue of Pennsylvania? It was not a Lutheran but a Reformed theologian, and a good, tough-minded American one, Reinhold Niebuhr,

who said of all preaching that is authentically Biblical and authentically Christian: "The Church is called through the Christian preacher *to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.*" A Lutheran theologian might have reversed that order, with Law before Gospel, but Niebuhr got it just right in light of today's Gospel. None of us likes being afflicted or vexed, especially not when we were just getting comfortable with our way of life. But, there is nothing in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God that is not for our hearing, not for your hearing or for mine, not as long as we are in this life and under God's judgment.

We need to be 'afflicted,' vexed, contradicted, upset by God's Word in Jesus Christ, especially and particularly where we have tamed Jesus

into our pet image of a comforting Jesus only, where we have domesticated the Holy Trinity into a pet household god, where we live in plenty while others live in want, where we enjoy what looks like peace while others must bear the scourge of war. The Holy Spirit Who moved Isaiah and all the Prophets, the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son, the incarnate Word of God, gives us the grace to expect such a harsh first Word of judgment and to be thankful for it, that we may truly hear that final Word of God for the sake of which the world was created and Christ came to redeem that world. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins
us by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to
His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with
the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever.

✠ Amen.

