



Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 30 January 2022

READINGS

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Cor 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

This Sunday's readings encourage reflection on our response – both personal, as individuals, and collective, as a congregation and as a church – a response to the Epiphany, the revelation of Christ to the world and in this case, Christ being revealed to his hometown.

Last week's reading from the Gospel of Luke (4:14-21) left us right in the middle of Jesus' homecoming appearance in the synagogue at Nazareth, when he read an inspiring passage from the prophet Isaiah: 18

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." and then followed it up with a simple yet powerful line in verse 21: *"Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"*

Let me digress a bit:

In her book, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*," Rachel Held Evans describes the universal power of origin stories: "Origin stories tell us who we are, where we come from, and what the world is like. They dictate the things we believe, the brands we buy, the holidays we celebrate, and the people we revere or despise. In most African languages, there is always this question asked when you find yourself in a foreign environment: *Uwakabani? O mang? O tswa kae?* Sometimes we construct our present realities around our stories of origin; other times we construct our stories of origin around our present realities; most of the time, it's a little of both."

Perhaps we can all resonate with what Evans describes. For most of us, if not all of us, our childhood was steeped in stories of our origin — stories of a distant culture we were supposed to embrace as our own. And I am sure many of us have heard statements such as "Remember who you are and where you come from," But often, these same origin stories dictate who our friends could be, or which racial and ethnic groups we needed to distrust, or what we could and couldn't think, question, or become – that is not life-giving. Sometimes origin stories have the power to oppress and suffocate us.

In the reading from the prophet Jeremiah, when he was called by God to be a prophet, he struggled against his self-imposed (and maybe family or community imposed) limited self image. He knew that prophets had not only the weight of the word of God on their shoulders but also faced the contempt and unhappiness of the people they had been asked to speak to. He also knew too well the usual phrase "know your place." It is for this reason that Jeremiah responds to God's call with the words: "I'm only a

boy and I do not know how to speak.” This self-limiting reply is met with God’s overwhelming assurance: “Do not be afraid”, said the Lord to Jeremiah, “for I am with you to deliver you”.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth after a very successful start to his ministry. In the weeks preceding his return, he had developed a reputation for his wisdom and authority. He had proclaimed God’s kingdom with educational parables. He had earned the trust of twelve loyal disciples. He had exorcised demons, healed the sick, calmed a storm, and raised a little daughter from the dead. He had become, in other words, a very famous rabbi and healer! The hometown boy had made it in life!

So when he returns home to Nazareth, Jesus enters the synagogue of his childhood, and begins to teach. At first, things go very well; Jesus is received with astonishment and curiosity: “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?”

But then something happens. He started challenging them: 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.

And then, pushing them further Jesus reminds his hearers of two great figures in the Hebrew Bible: Elijah, who connected with only one widow, who was also a foreigner and Elisha his successor, who healed only one leper who was also a foreigner! In other words, they feel entitled to the benefits this young man from their own town has to offer. So he draws a very clear line for them. The new work that God is doing in this world is not just for those who are on the inside; not just for us. Instead, it is for all the world. Look at what Elijah did. Look at what Elisha did. They helped foreigners! This is what God is doing today.

At this, the assembly shifts from amazement to rage. They drive Jesus out of town, and try to throw him off a cliff! In other words: Who does he think he is? What is so special about him? A mere carpenter of questionable parentage couldn’t have amounted to anything. In other words, what they were saying was: We know exactly where you come from, boy! Don’t get too big for your shoes! Remember your place!”

The truly sad and astonishing thing about this story is that the people’s suspicion and resentment prevented Jesus from doing his ministry among his own townspeople. In some mysterious and disturbing way, the people's small-mindedness, their lack of trust, and their inability to embrace a new facet of Jesus's life and mission, kept them spiritually blind. They were unable to welcome the unfamiliar within the familiar. They were uninterested in recognizing the extraordinary within the ordinary. So they missed the presence of God in their midst.

So, for us today: how, when, and where do we misuse origin stories — our own or other people’s — to limit God’s “deeds of power.” How do we refuse to let others in our life grow and change? When do we box them into stories that are unfairly narrow and constricting? Where in our life do we take offense at the new and the unfamiliar, instead of moving on with openness and expectant curiosity? Do we allow the people we are close to to become better people through our encouragement? Do we allow ourselves to become better people? Or do we cut ourselves and others off with these kinds of thoughts: You

will always be small, weak, broken, insufficient, disappointing. You will never outgrow your background, race, family, upbringing, wounds, addictions.

The late Rachel Held Evans wrote: “Spiritual maturity requires untangling these stories, sorting fact from fiction (or, more precisely, truth from untruth), and embracing those stories that move us toward growth and greatness while rejecting or reinterpreting those that do harm.”

It is no easy task in societies where we judge one another on our social standing, our pedigree and historically, on the colour of one’s skin. It takes patience and humility, and sometimes it hurts a great deal. Jesus must have been hurt by that judgment – it prevented him from fulfilling his mission work in his hometown, Nazareth. Today’s message perhaps is: Let us enable one another, rather than pull one another down, simply because we know one another’s origin stories. Maybe we just might encounter God in the familiar, the ordinary, people we might be tempted to count as nothings!

Glory to God whose power, resting in us, can do infinitely more than we can ever ask or imagine.

Amen.