

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 1:4-10
SECOND LESSON: Luke 4:21-30
January 30, 2022

“Do Not Be Afraid of Them”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Our scripture today picks up right where we left off last week. Jesus has just finished preaching in his old hometown synagogue. They were impressed that he was so well-spoken. Where did he get all this knowledge? Isn't this Joseph's oldest boy? But there is something else going on here—an undercurrent that Jesus was well aware of. If Jesus became a well-known public speaker and teacher, might that not reflect well on his town of origin? Could there be some profit for them all in this? Couldn't they claim him as their home town son? Shouldn't he do in Nazareth even more healing miracles than anywhere else? Shouldn't everyone prosper from this kid they all ignored before who now turned out to be someone quite special?

Jesus knew their thoughts. So he said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’” But he made it painfully obvious that he was not willing to be used like this. He didn't come into the world as a commodity to be exploited. And he made this clear by doing what I would never do. He deliberately provoked them. “How to infuriate people” is not in any seminary curriculum that I am aware of. Not that pastors don't infuriate people. We do it all the time. We just don't intentionally do it.

Jesus then quoted another proverb. It is not a proverb found in the Old Testament. It is a cultural proverb. “No prophet is accepted in his hometown.” We have another one with the same meaning. “Familiarity breeds contempt.” There are many times when we don't treat the familiar with the same respect as the distant. An expert from another city is listened to. Joe down the street with the same level of education is not, because after all, we know Joe. There's no mystique there. We've seen him mow his lawn. We've met him at the hardware store buying carpentry tools. We know his sister and his sister's kids. What could Joe possibly know more than me?

Jesus then chose two illustrations from scripture involving Gentiles, not Jews, who were chosen by God and blessed. There were a lot of widows in Israel during Elijah's time. Elijah didn't seek refuge with any of them. Instead, he went to a widow in Zarephath. And there were many in Israel with leprosy during the time of the prophet Elisha. But only Naaman the Syrian was cleansed.

On hearing this, the people erupted. The crowd turned from interest to rage in an instant. They almost killed him. Jesus was driven out of the town.

They intended to throw him off a cliff and stone him to death. Mobs are volatile and unpredictable. We have seen mob violence in our country and we've seen it in other countries. But mysteriously, this mob simply lost him. Confusion set in. They couldn't find him, and he walked out from their midst unharmed. God delivered Jesus from peril.

If I were Jesus I would have left town and never opened my mouth again. Of course, we know that when Jesus left town he did no such thing. Jesus was bold in confronting evil and hypocrisy. He gave the poor hope, but those who exploited the poor he called out in very public ways. Charles Wesley wrote "Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild" as a children's hymn. I understand it was for children, but I still think it gives us entirely the wrong perception of Jesus. During his lifetime Jesus showed great mercy, but he also confronted people. He called Pharisees white-washed tombs to their faces. Sometimes I think Tom Petty's, "You can stand me up at the gates of hell but I won't back down," fits better!

Jesus' entire ministry was within Israel. Only at the periphery did Gentiles and other outsiders come into the picture. We think of the Samaritan woman and Jairus and his daughter. And there were others, but at one point in the gospel of Matthew we find a Jesus who comes across as downright rude in his refusal to help an outsider. He told a Canaanite woman who came to him begging for help her demon possessed daughter, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." (Matthew 15: 24) She persisted and her daughter was healed. When Jesus sent the twelve disciples out for their first mission without him he instructed them: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. (Matthew 10: 5-8) We see this, and yet here Jesus deliberately gives two illustrations involving Gentiles, and at the end of Matthew's gospel, easily the most Jewish of all the gospels, the risen Jesus gives this instruction: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of **all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (Matthew 28: 18-20) Even before the gospel spread to the Gentiles through the ministry of the apostle Paul there were signs that this was a much bigger message and a much bigger salvation. It came first to the Jewish nation, but salvation wasn't just on reserve for what we might call, "friends and family". Jesus' message was for more than the people of Nazareth and more than for the Jewish nation. This Jewish Messiah came to reclaim the world for God.

Jesus was not afraid. At least it doesn't look like he was afraid. But I had a think about that and considered that maybe the "not being afraid" part is not true. When Jesus became incarnate he took on human nature, and part of the human experience is fear. And fear is very physical. It happens whether we want it to or not. Years ago I did a high ropes course. I knew I was "on belay." I knew I was absolutely completely safe. But try telling that to my legs 30 feet off the ground. I could NOT stop them from shaking. It was like I had no control whatsoever. When our bodies perceive danger they take over. Our guts churn

and our palms sweat. Our heart beats faster. Adrenalin races through our veins preparing us for fight or flight. In extreme circumstances facing imminent violent death it is not unusual to lose bowel and bladder control. This is the type of ultimate terror the Nazis inflicted on people, something we have just been reminded of recently on International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27th. A God who was truly one of us would have experienced fear *physically*, as we do. We know that Jesus agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane. It makes sense that he would have experienced fear when the mob turned on him. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the presence of fear, and doing what has to be done anyway.

I wish I could say that it was just as simple as saying we don't need to be afraid because we will be physically protected all the time. It is not. Jesus was saved this time, but later he faced the cross. Brave and wonderful people are cut down by mobs. Lives are taken too soon. Courageous prophets speaking out against hateful regimes are imprisoned, and sometimes they suffer torture and death. We all want guarantees that we will be safe as long as we are doing what God wants us to do, and saying what God wants us to say, but sometimes God speaks through our suffering every bit as much as God uses our words. Knowing what we face and choosing to be faithful ANYWAY is what God asks of us. When God tells us not to be afraid, God is really asking us to trust God in the storm. God knows what our bodies do to us because God designed our bodies for survival and we *should* fear standing next to a cliff edge. Foolish people have died trying to take selfies in dangerous places because they did not have an appropriate level of fear. But God wants us to live fearlessly in other areas of our lives, to give our fear to God and not be bound by it when fear interferes with doing the right thing. Amen.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴ The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

⁶ "Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."

⁷ But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.

⁹ Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

23 Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

24 “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. **25** I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. **26** Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. **27** And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. **29** They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. **30** But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.