

4th Sunday After Epiphany  
January 31, 2016  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson  
Luke 4:14-21  
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

[click here to read scripture texts for the day](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

So, you may have heard - there's something big happening here in Iowa tomorrow night? Apparently there are some people, I can't quite seem to recall their names, who would like us to caucus for them. Thankfully this part of the process will soon be over. And thanks to everyone in our congregation who has helped Winneshiek County prepare and be informed before caucus night tomorrow.

As we head into caucus night, I think it's helpful that today our scripture readings have a lot to say about prophets and prophetic speech: We hear about the prophet Jeremiah in the first reading and prophetic powers in the second reading. In the Gospel reading we hear about the prophets Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha and how prophets aren't welcome in their hometowns.

All this talk about prophets and prophetic powers is helpful right now **not** because prophets predict the future and can tell us who will win in Iowa and who will win the presidential election. When we talk about being prophetic in the biblical sense, we're not talking about trying to see into the future with Tarot cards and palm reading and the like. Biblical prophets are people who speak and act on God's behalf in order to enact God's justice. The prophecies and promises they speak do, or will eventually, come to pass; but that isn't because of special clairvoyant powers of the prophet. It's because God is at work to bring about God's kingdom and the justice that the prophets address.

So, these texts about prophets are good for us to hear now during election season, and in this time when so many pressing issues face our country, because one of the roles of the church is to be prophetic. We are called to speak boldly about God's justice and what God's justice means for our life together as a people - for our political life. Yet, in our day so many people are speaking boldly with lots of anger. So many are claiming to speak for God.

In this context, how can we carry out the prophetic role of the church faithfully? How can we discern if we're boldly speaking of God's justice or just angrily pursuing our own agendas? Similarly, when all the angry political rhetoric makes us want to check out, how will we have the courage to speak and witness to God's hopes for justice and peace for all? In our

conversations, in our caucusing, in our posts on facebook or letters to the editor - how can we know when and in what way to speak?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus delivers a prophetic sermon in which he seems to get pretty riled up. He certainly gets other people pretty angry at him - angry enough to want to throw him off a cliff! What's going on here and what can it say to us as we try to carry out the prophetic work of the church? Let's unpack the story a bit.

Jesus gets up in front of his hometown crowd and reads powerful promises about justice from the prophet Isaiah - the poor will be lifted up, captives will be released, the blind will see and the oppressed will be set free. Then he rolls up the scroll, sits down and says, "I'm the one who fulfills these promises." That's an awfully audacious claim. It takes some kind of guts to stand up and say that you are, in fact, God's gift to humanity.

Except, that's not what gets people so mad at Jesus. When Jesus says he's the one who fulfills these promises, at first the people eat it up. We're told, "All were amazed at his gracious words." They heard good news for themselves in Jesus's words - they were poor and oppressed, captive to the dominating Roman powers, many were blind. This was great good news for them; you can almost hear them saying, "Crazy, isn't he Joseph's son, but hey if this is true, this is great. No more Roman occupation, no more being second-class citizens, God is here and God's going to take care of us. And, one of our own is going to do this. I can tell all my friends I've known Jesus since back in the day. He's going to make things right, and I'm sure he means to start right here at home."

The trouble comes when Jesus makes it clear that he has come to fulfill these promises for the sake of all people, even their enemies. Jesus reminds them of two stories from their collective history, times when the prophets Elijah and Elisha were sent to foreigners, to people outside of Israel, even to their enemy. He points out that in a time of drought the prophet Elijah was sent to a widow in Zarapath, to a person outside of the chosen people. And Elisha was sent to heal a leper who was a general in an army fighting the Israelites rather than to any lepers in Israel.

The stories he recalls for them are pointed reminders that God goes looking for the outsiders, that God takes care of "those foreigners" even when there are pressing needs among the insiders. It's as though Jesus is telling them, "I'm not here to just take good care of you, I'm here to care for those you've overlooked." That's enough of a shock to make them want to hurl Jesus off a cliff.

Many people use this story about Jesus as a way to rationalize their behavior when others get mad at them - "Jesus got people really angry so if I'm ticking people off I'm being like Jesus, I'm being a prophet." Many of us justify our angry rants with loved ones or in a larger group by saying, "even Jesus got angry." Maybe, except Jesus

really was God's great gift to humanity. He was human and divine and his life on earth was deeply grounded in prayer and filled with the Holy Spirit.

If we are to carry out the prophetic role of the church, we needed to be grounded in prayer and open to the Spirit. We need to be grounded in prayer because prayer can help us let go of our ego and listen for God's Spirit. Just a few minutes of quiet prayer and meditation as we start the day can loosen our need to be right, and open us to God. When we're in the middle of an exchange in person, in email or online, taking a pause and a deep breath as we consider if and how to speak can help us be less ego-driven and more open to the Spirit's leading.

It's also interesting that today as we heard about prophets we also heard the famous words about love written by the Apostle Paul. We're reminded that if we do not have love, we are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. When Jesus spoke to the crowd in Nazareth he did seem angry with them, but he certainly had love for them, for God is love.

As we speak and act in this polarized time we need to be rooted and grounded in love. We need to speak the truth in love. This can seem daunting - love is such a big, grandiose word. So, Paul spells it out for us in smaller, more concrete chunks so we can visualize how love is lived out. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. These are the steps we can work toward each day - to be patient and kind, to avoid envy, boasting and so on.

Prayer can also help because it helps us let go of our ego and be healed of ego-driven behavior like envy, arrogance and irritation. It can be so powerful to do a simple breath prayer where as you breathe out you imagine letting go of things that keep us from love and then breathing in God's Spirit that helps us to love and to speak. Let's try that now - just take a few breaths to let go and to breathe in the Spirit.

Even with prayer, even when we are seeking to be open to the Spirit, we will get it wrong. We will get angry, we will offend, we will be too easily offended, we will be jerks, we will be silent when we should speak out. When that happens, and it will often, we need to remember the promise of this scripture from I Corinthians - the promise that love never ends. The love of God cannot be stopped - even by an angry mob trying to hurl Jesus off a cliff, even by an angry mob that ultimately crucified Jesus.

Nothing, not even death, can stop God from loving us in Christ Jesus. The love of God shown to us in Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends

This love will never stop seeking justice and healing and peace for us and for our whole world.

Thanks be to God.