

Why Were the People so Mad?

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴ Now the word of the *Lord* came to me saying,

⁵ ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’

⁶ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord *God*!

Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’

⁷ But the *Lord* said to me,

‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

⁸ Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the *Lord*.’

⁹ Then the *Lord* put out his hand
and touched my mouth; and the *Lord* said to me,
‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.’

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ ²² 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?’ ²³ He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”’ ²⁴ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers* in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The scripture from last week and this week go together. They explore one of the earliest stories recorded in the Bible about the adult Jesus. Actually we know very little about what happened to Jesus until he began teaching and preaching in the region of Galilee, near his hometown of Nazareth. No doubt the people in Nazareth had got wind that he was developing a following. So when he shows up in Nazareth they are curious.

I've always read and heard this story as a background for the phrase "we can't go home again." As we grow up and leave our families and the network of relationships that nurtured us, it is often difficult for the folks who knew us when we were young, when we were foolish, when we were immature, when we made stupid mistakes—to take us seriously as adults. Jesus was a local boy who was becoming a celebrity. People were following him. Today this might mean that people were standing in line to hear him speak, or his picture was on the cover of some magazine; or he had his own website. Maybe the paparazzi were following him around to get pictures.

Anyway, the people who knew him when he was a kid, when he was "nobody," were not impressed. We have all experienced some of what happened to Jesus when we go back to visit relatives or participate in reunions. People who knew us "back then" do not really understand us "now." We have changed, but they still see us as we were.

This past week, when I looked at this story again, I found some new insights:

First of all, I realized that Jesus was reading a very familiar text from the prophet Isaiah (we read the first part of the story that last week). He reads from the Hebrew Scriptures:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because [God] has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
[God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In the past I have always thought that the Nazareth crowd was put off by the arrogance of Jesus. They are thinking, who does he think he is to claim that he has God's spirit, that God has anointed and sent him to proclaim recovery of sight and freedom to the oppressed? How does he know that this is the year of God's favor? Who is he to say that the scripture has been fulfilled? Jesus seems to anticipate their resistance, and states that prophets are often without honor in their hometown or their own country.

A few minutes ago we heard the words of the prophet Jeremiah. He felt that God was calling him to speak out. But he pleads, help me, I don't know how. I am only a boy, a kid. Jeremiah is reassured that God will be with him, in fact that God will put words into his mouth. And God charges Jeremiah to do new things—to pluck up and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant. Jeremiah is charged not to follow old assumptions. God has touched him. The agenda is new.

A few minutes ago we also sang one of my favorite hymns. “God, Speak to me that I may speak.” Every time I preach I have those moments of doubt. Who am I to stand up here and tell anybody about God. How can I do it, I am only human. So I hum this hymn, God, speak to me that I may speak. Give me the living echoes I need to offer to those of you sitting in the pews. Yet, I have decided that this hymn is too nice. It asks for glowing word and kindling thought. It seems to presume that if anyone speaks correctly the people will be happy to hear what is said. It doesn’t mention those times when the speaker or the preacher talks about things people don’t want to hear. In fact good preaching and teaching are not always what people want to hear. Sometimes good sermons are what the people need to hear. There is a saying that ministers are called to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Today let’s go deeper into to this story and try to figure out why this visit of Jesus to Nazareth turns into a mob scene. The people who knew Jesus best and had watched him grow up to become a nice young man, try to kill him. What made the people so mad?

We read that at first they are impressed. They speak well of him and they are “amazed at the gracious words that come from his mouth.” Then they become a bit critical, muttering to each other, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” Finally later—it is not clear exactly how much later. (Remember this text is written down years after the event, so a few phrases are used to carry a lot of meaning. It is biblical shorthand.). For some reason, in a relatively short span of time the admiration of those people from Nazareth turns to dismay and then to hatred. By the end of this encounter the crowd is outraged. They try to destroy him. What is going on here?

To answer this question there are three bits of information that provide clues: First let’s take a look at the writings of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus goes to the Nazareth synagogue and is given a scroll written by the prophet Isaiah to read. Isaiah is one of the most revered Hebrew prophets. Isaiah lifts spirits and helps people who are depressed and discouraged imagine a new future. Jesus reads about bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives, restoring sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor. If we go to the original text of Isaiah we discover that Jesus only read the beginning of a long section proclaiming that God is an inclusive and non-judgmental God. Luke does not write that all out in his gospel, but the text from Isaiah is well known and beloved. Many times because ink and paper or parchment is very expensive ancient writers do not write out everything. They put down a few phrases which become shorthand for the whole section in the Hebrew Scriptures (in this instance the whole 61st chapter of Isaiah).

After Jesus finishes reading he sits down (In ancient times speakers always stood to read the scriptures and then they would sit to teach and preach). When Jesus sits down he is not done, he is just beginning to explore the meaning of Isaiah’s prophetic words. He is a Rabbi—doing what Rabbis do.

If we look more closely at the full text of this section of Isaiah, it is very interesting. The message from the prophet is that God is changing priorities. Isaiah says little about how God will favor the Hebrew people. Rather Isaiah proclaims a new future where strangers will be treated equally, where God will bless all peoples and the self-righteousness of Israel will be replaced

with new growth (the prophet uses the word “shoots.”) to benefit ALL the nations. Isaiah and Jesus do not bring good news to those observant Jews in Nazareth. Their message is that God is bigger than they thought. Isaiah no longer sees God as an ethnocentric deity. The people want to think of Yahweh as their God, but Isaiah proclaims that Israel’s God is bigger. He speaks of the God of creation—the God of all nations.

Second this message of inclusion is reinforced when Jesus points to the story of the widow in Sidon. Again, I think we can assume that the people would have known this story. Jesus says very little, but they remember the story. In that story God tells the prophet (Elijah) that a woman in Sidon (a Gentile woman, not a Jew, and not a male) will support him and feed him when he is hungry. Strange. She is an outsider, but she is the one serving God’s purposes. Jesus says, to their dismay, that there were many widows in Israel who might have helped, but Elijah was not sent to them. Elijah is told to go to a widow in Sidon. God’s work is carried out by a foreigner.

And third, Jesus reminds them of the story of Namaan and the prophet Elisha. Again this would have been a story that the good Jews in Nazareth would have known. Naaman was a Syrian afflicted with leprosy. In the story he (a Gentile, not a Jew) is cured by Elisha. He is a leper, unclean according to Jewish purity codes. Again Jesus makes the point that God is doing this intentionally. Jesus says, there were many lepers in Israel at that time, but God chose to work through the faith of a Syrian leper. Jesus reminds his listeners that God’s purposes may be served by outsiders.

In his references to these two little stories, Jesus is undermining, even attacking the special status and relationship of the Jews in Nazareth to their God. Jesus, they suddenly realize, is no longer a trustworthy keeper of their tradition. He is undermining their world view. The point, as one scholar puts it, “seems to be that God finds it easier to do God’s work among outsiders, people living in far-off lands, and with odd and unexpected people, than it is to work with those who are supposed to be in the know or think they are in the know.” Jesus is no longer flattering the hometown crowd with a feel-good sermon. He is telling them that they have forgotten what it means to be God’s people. They have become self-centered and ingrown. Not good news.

The implications of this encounter in the synagogue in Nazareth are far-reaching. Jesus is telling his listeners that they are not “better than” other people. They have been called to be active instruments of God’s purposes of healing and grace for all people. In these words Jesus says that God’s work can and is being done by the unclean, the uncircumcised, the unknown and the unobservant. His message is unnerving. It undermines all that they think of as important about being God’s people. In fact, the idea of God’s inclusive, expansive, limitless favor drives the community into a murderous rage.

In this church and in the United Church of Christ, we celebrate diversity and openness. We say that “God is still speaking.” We say, “Don’t ever place a period where God has placed a comma.” We say “whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” We say that we are a just peace church and an open and affirming church. We say that we aspire to be a multiracial, multicultural church accessible to all. We are not there yet, but we seek to be that kind of community. We say expect the unexpected, because we know that so many religious communities build fences and control the ways people encounter God, trying to

keep their churches pure, or orthodox. We don't want to do that. We want to be different. So we open doors and try to include everyone. We have the best of intentions. We affirm commas rather than periods.

Yet, when we say whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey you are welcome here we have a problem. Jesus was telling those people in Nazareth that God (their special wonderful God of Israel, who had given them commandments to live by and brought them out of Egypt) was bigger than their "chosen people" mindset could imagine. Jesus was telling them that God was using gentiles, women, lepers, and foreigners—people not even descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—to serve Divine goals. These were the very people that the Jews in Nazareth would never talk to, agree with, or feel compassion for. So the crowd gets mad when they began to understand what Jesus is saying. He is undermining their confidence that they are good upright observant Jews. He is telling them that God relates to, even depends upon people that they refuse to value.

How do we feel about that? We don't think we are like that. We say that everyone is welcome in our church. Everyone? Do we really mean that? Think for a minute.

If we meet someone who does not believe that women should be clergy or priests, are they welcome here? I don't know about you, but I don't want to welcome that person. If we meet someone who is convinced that our national security agencies ought to use torture under certain circumstances to protect our society, are they welcome here? It is hard to welcome someone if I think that they are wrong. If we meet someone who thinks that all this stuff about climate change is not true, are they welcome here? Maybe, but I will work hard to re-educate them.

In this church we have strong opinions and we make judgments about those who do not agree with us. If we meet someone who is convinced that homosexuality, or bisexuality is unnatural, are they welcome here? If we meet someone who wants the Supreme Court to make abortion illegal, are they welcome here? If we meet someone who says that only baptized Christians will be saved, are they welcome here? If we meet someone who says that Haitians are reaping the fruits of a pact with the devil made by their ancestors, are they welcome here? If we meet someone who refuses to support the marriage of gay and lesbian persons, are they welcome here?

What do we do to welcome, truly welcome, people who do not believe or think the same way we do? We say that diversity is important. We want to be multicultural and multiracial, but can we imagine welcoming people who do not think about some of the pressing social and political issues as we do? How do we hold on to our convictions without creating an uncomfortable environment for those who do not share all of our convictions? There are times when even some of us do not share our thoughts on certain issues because we fear rejection. What would it take to welcome, engage and honor deep differences on some justice and theological issues? Can we talk about these things without assuming that we are all on the same political page?

I could go on, but you get the point. If we really believe that whoever people are and wherever they are on life's journey they are still welcome here, it is really difficult. Fortunately (or maybe unfortunately) many people who do not agree with us on many things would never actually show up. But if they did, what would we do? Could we welcome them? Should we welcome them?

Would we get mad (like the people in Nazareth) if someone told us that we actually ought to welcome some of these folks, even if we deplore what they say and do? Yes, we might get mad. I can imagine a crowd of us putting together a demonstration against some of these people and their positions. And if someone like Jesus came along and told us that God was a God of these people we might really get mad. Maybe not mad enough to try to kill someone, but deeply upset. Our views of God and justice and truth would be challenged. Our pride about our self-serving hospitality would be in shambles

This story about Jesus and the Nazareth crowd is a story about us. Many times we refuse to face the narrowness of our opinions and world view. God is bigger than our assumptions. Jesus challenges us not to confuse our own ideas about God—with God. Those folks in Nazareth did not like being told that outsiders could and did do God’s work. We don’t either. As one preacher put it, "No matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to get God to respect our boundaries."

Why did the people get mad? Parker Palmer in his book, *The Company of Strangers*, gives us the answer. People get mad when their God is too small. He writes,

"At the heart of any authentic religious experience, is recognition that God's nature is too huge, God's movement too deep, ever to be comprehended by a single conception or point of view....God's truth is singular and eternal, but the forms in which we give it expression are as finite and fragile as clay pots, and we must always be ready to break them open on behalf of a larger vision of truth."

This is what it means to say “God is still speaking.” It means that we embrace and even welcome people who are really different, who may embody and believe things we find abhorrent. It means that we need to control our anger, to listen, to replace our periods with commas and contemplate anew how we can live with difference and diversity as an inclusive welcoming community.