
The Hometown Surprise

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Epiphany 4 – Year C

The town of Nazareth is abuzz with excitement and proud anticipation. Jesus, son of their very own Joseph and Mary—Jesus, the local boy who went off and made a name for himself—is coming back home! Surely, he’s going to tell them how grateful he is for all they’ve taught him and done for him. Surely, he’s going to congratulate them, and tell them he wouldn’t be here today, if it weren’t for them. Surely, some of his newfound glory will rub off on them.

But that’s not all they’re looking forward to. You see, Jesus can *do* things—miraculous things! He’s been traveling through Capernaum, teaching and healing. And if he’s been doing all these wonders for them, many of whom are not even Jews, just imagine what he’ll do here, for his own people! So, as soon as they got word he was coming, the people of Nazareth started a laundry list of things for him to tend to: James’ broken leg, Rachel’s childlessness, Joseph’s failing business, the leper on the edge of town. Maybe Jesus could throw in some rain, too.

When Jesus finally gets there, and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath day as is his custom, he finds it packed. All eyes are fixed on him as he unrolls the scroll, reads from the prophet Isaiah, and announces that, today, this scripture has been fulfilled. People nod confidently, and call out a few “Amen.”

But then Jesus shows them that they don’t know him as well as they think. He’s not only the son of Joseph of Nazareth; he’s the son of God. He hasn’t come just for them, but for the salvation of all people.

No, they don’t know him as well as they think, but he knows them. He knows they expect special treatment from him. He knows they expect him to love them the most, and feel beholden to them, and do more for them than he’s done for anyone else.

He wastes no time setting them straight. He will not be their personal genie. They should know this already, he suggests with some irritation, as their own scriptures say as much about other prophets: Elijah and Elisha, for example, weren’t sent to Israelites alone, but also to outsiders—to the widow at Zarephath, and to Naaman the Syrian.

Suddenly, the mood sours. All in the synagogue are filled with rage. They drive Jesus out of town toward a cliff, intending to throw him off of it.

What just happened? Why this about-face? Why so much resistance? Why the violent rage?

Well, for one, Jesus has challenged their expectations and disappointed them. More than that: they feel betrayed by him. Rather than stroking their spiritual egos, as they expected, he exposes their complacency and selfishness.

Second, he challenges their sense of fairness. The fair thing, it seems, would be to pay them back for all they’ve done for him. To save his best blessing for the people closest to him. To reward them for their faithfulness in God. But instead, it seems he’s going to squander his gifts—and *their* investment—on outsiders.

Finally, he challenges their sense of exceptionalism and control: their belief that Jesus is *their* guy. That God is *their* God.

That they have a claim on him—even control over him.

These *are* hard things to hear. They were hard things to hear then, and they're hard to hear now.

Don't we also tend to think that God is *our* God—and on *our* side? Don't we also imagine that we have a better understanding of who God is, and what God wants, and whom God loves, than anyone else? Don't we also expect God to reward our faithfulness with all kinds of good things?

Of course, *I* know better than this. But when it comes down to it, I slip into this way of thinking all the time—this fantasy that God's call to me is really all about me. I scour the Bible for the good news and reassurance it offers... for me. I assume that if I'm really following God's will, things will go smoothly, for me—that the more I do for God, the more God will do for me. If God has really called me, then God will do great things through me—and for me. People will marvel at my inspired teachings and my good works, and I will feel fulfilled and happy. That's how it's supposed to work, right?

Sometimes, we as a people, as Church, can slip into this way of thinking, too, imagining that God is our God—that God works for us, and owes us something. Sometimes, we can get so preoccupied with ourselves that we forget that we're not the only people God cares for, or calls. And that Jesus didn't come just for those of us who call ourselves Christian—the *right* kind of Christian.

But that's just it: we don't get to keep Jesus for ourselves—or control what he says or does, or where he goes, or whom he talks to. We get to follow him. That's it. We get to follow him. Not to have him follow us, but to follow him, which is a blessing in and of itself.

And what does it mean for us to follow *this* Christ, who crosses all kinds of boundaries and loves so indiscriminately? What does it mean about our call?

It means that we follow Jesus outside of our comfort zones, and across the divisions that separate us and pit us against one another. It means that we care for those who are most vulnerable, and try to love our enemies. And it means that our call—our ministry points beyond ourselves to God—and to God's love for all people. We are called to spread the good news of that love to the ends of the earth, which means, of course, giving it away. Maybe even giving ourselves away.