

Jesus the Preacher

They say that a preacher's spouse is usually his or her number one advisor and critic. This becomes abundantly clear when, one Sunday after worship, the pastor of a church that shall remain nameless goes back to the parsonage. He sits down with his wife, and she asks him how he thinks the service went. The preacher shrugs. And replies, "The anthem was powerful, and I think the times of prayer and Communion were deeply worshipful, but I just don't think the sermon ever got off the ground." His wife looks over at him and, before she can stop herself, she says, "Well, it sure did taxi long enough!"

It sounds as though this woman knows her preacher husband isn't perfect. And that's the case with most preachers—including yours! According to Jan Karon, author of the Mitford novels, "The perfect pastor preaches exactly ten minutes. He condemns sin, but never hurts anybody's feelings. He works from eight in the morning until midnight and is also the church janitor. He is twenty-nine years old and has forty years [of] experience. He makes fifteen house calls a day and is always in the office."

You know, when Jesus comes to preach at Nazareth, he should receive high marks on several of these criteria. After all—he's just thirty years old. And his sermon definitely is not too long.

But it's a critically important one. In today's gospel narrative, Luke tells us that in accordance with the custom of the day, Jesus reads the Scripture and then sits down to preach. Every eye in the place is on him. And then that Nazareth congregation gets to hear Jesus deliver his keynote message. It's his mission statement. It's what his ministry will be all about. And he chooses to preach it in his hometown synagogue. Luke is careful to remind us that Nazareth is where Jesus has been brought up.

This is where people have known Jesus since he was a little boy. This is where people have seen him running, laughing, playing, doing the things children do. This is where people have watched him grow. This is where people have watched him learn the trade of Joseph. *Hey, they call to each other across the marketplace, did you hear that the carpenter's son is back in town?* And on the sabbath day, as they enter and greet one another, the buzz is all about the visiting preacher. *Look—up front—it's Mary's boy!*

Preachers don't always have an easy time of it when we go back to visit the churches we used to call home. That could be why our United Methodist bishops and their cabinets don't usually appoint pastors to our home churches. The people there know us well—maybe *too* well. They've been with us in all the ordinariness of life. They've watched us grow—spiritually, if not physically. They knew us before. They knew us *when*. When we stand before them, we're preaching to a tough room. The home folks know where we've been. They know where we came from.

And this Nazareth crowd knows—or *thinks* they know—where Jesus came from. They know him as the son of Joseph. They think they know all about Jesus because, in very many ways, he's so familiar.

Just as this passage from Luke's Gospel is familiar to us—especially the part where Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah. We've heard it many times; it may have lost its freshness and some of its meaning. We want to hear it anew. Through eyes of faith, we want to see Jesus the preacher.

And, along with those Nazareth worshipers, to hear his words: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*. When you and I hear this, we remember that at his baptism, the Holy Spirit has

descended on Jesus. Anointed Jesus. In the synagogue, Jesus tells the home folks: God has anointed me. God has appointed me. God has chosen me and sent me to do this work.

Those first listeners know their scriptures well. They know that God's anointed One is the Messiah. And an amazing realization washes over them. This Jesus is claiming to be the very One Israel has awaited for centuries. *Today—he announces—today you're seeing and hearing Scripture come true right in front of you!*

His words are electric. His hearers are astounded. But it's not a long leap from the astonishment of finding out who Jesus is to considering what he could do for them. And this Nazareth crowd—their wheels start turning. You can almost hear them pondering: *what's in it for us, Jesus?*

Right here in your hometown, there are some sick people. How about doing some of those wondrous healings like you did over in Capernaum? How about a miracle—or two or three? Put Nazareth on the map! Oh, and if you really are sent by God, make it rain so we'll have a bumper crop and abundant wealth!

But Jesus the preacher knows exactly what they're thinking. And his sermon starts to take a different tack. *Listen up, folks,* he

says in so many words. *It's like this. Israel is the chosen people. But it hasn't always been all about Israel. Long ago, in the time of the great prophet Elijah, God didn't send him to any of the Israelite widows. No. Elijah was sent to a Canaanite woman, a widow in Sidon, and he brought her son back to life. And later, Elijah's successor, Elisha—do you think God sent him to heal lepers in Israel? No. You know who he cleansed—Naaman the Syrian commander! It wasn't all about your nation back in the day, and it isn't all about you in Nazareth now.*

Well. The hometown crowd approves of the Isaiah passage Jesus chose as his text, and they like his sermon intro. They think it might be of some personal benefit to them. But they *don't* like the rest of his sermon—not one little bit! They do *not* consider him the perfect preacher. They've expected that with Jesus in their corner, the blessings of God would be reserved especially for them, not for some foreign woman and *not* for a Syrian warlord! When they find out that's not the case, every member of First Synagogue Nazareth turns on him. Call the PPRC chair! Call the district superintendent! Call the bishop! Run this sorry preacher out of town!

So infuriated are they that they want to kill Jesus. *Attempt* to kill him on the hill outside their town. Reminding us that later, on another hillside, others *would* kill Jesus. This One who came to his own home. This One whose own people did not accept him. Ironically, because they don't accept Jesus, the people of Nazareth are unable to receive the very blessings they seek.

Are we a bit too hard on them, these people who first hear Jesus the preacher? Are we so different from them? In this reading from Luke's Gospel, is Jesus preaching only to a first-century synagogue? Or are his words for us in the twenty-first century church as well?

When we hear about Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, don't we—sometimes at least—contemplate what he might be able to *do* for us? Do *we* accept him? As he truly is? Or have we tried to reshape him into who we want him to be? Into someone whose purpose is to miraculously solve all our problems? Satisfy our every need? Make us happy, healthy, and prosperous?

Have we tried to transform him into someone who encourages us in believing—like those long-ago Nazarenes—that God blesses us and our way of life and our nation and our culture above all others? My brothers and sisters, this is the very same

Jesus whose birth—the angel said—brings great joy for *all* people! Would this Jesus have us believe that God loves only those who look like us, talk like us, think like us, and worship like us?

When followers of Jesus try to place limitations on him—try to make him their exclusive property—his gospel becomes so distorted that its good news can't bless those followers.

But—thanks be to God—today, straight from the lips of Jesus, we hear the crux of his Nazareth sermon, for Israel and for the church: *You are God's people. It's true. But the grace of God is not for you only.* The gospel of Jesus Christ affirms that God's mercy, God's grace, and God's love are for *all*.

That's what Jesus the preacher wants us to hear and to understand today. Jesus the preacher calls us to be not an inward-focused church, but to be an outward-focused church. Jesus the preacher calls us to live into the mission for which he came. Jesus the preacher calls you and me to continue the work he's begun, the work he will complete when he returns in glory.

He calls us and he sends us, Beloved. Even as Jesus the Christ was sent, so now he sends you and me.

Jesus sends you and me *to bring good news to the poor.* To work toward an end to poverty and need and hunger.

Jesus sends you and me *to let the oppressed go free*. To stand with the vulnerable. To stand with the exploited. And to stand against structures and systems of injustice.

Jesus sends you and me *to proclaim release to the captives*. To liberate those imprisoned by anxiety, by addiction, by prejudice.

Jesus sends you and me *to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind*. To bring those who stumble in darkness into his marvelous light.

Jesus sends you and me *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*—to announce to those who need to hear, the message that they will be delivered from the debt of sin and from slavery to all that would bind them. To profess our faith that still today, our God is acting to save the world God loves.

And Jesus sends you and me today to join in the work of making God's great kingdom a reality in this world, as it is in heaven.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.