

Epiphany 4C-RCL-2022

January 30, 2022—At the Church of the Advent, Hatboro

By the Rev. Naz Javier, Priest-in-Charge

Jeremiah 1:4-10 | 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 | Luke 4:21-30

As we draw near to you, O God: may your Word be the wisdom spoken; may your Word be the message heard; may your Word be light to guide us as you also send us into the world. In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. (cf. Deuteronomy 5:27)

1. I think it's safe enough to say that all of us worshipping today have experienced—at some point in our lives—being on the receiving end of the comment, “I remember you when you were this small,” a comment usually accompanied by the speaker gesturing like so in the air; and usually in the context of what can feel like a first-time encounter after a long period of absence. I suppose, some of us may have been the speakers of that comment. One of the things we share as a species is our being anchored in time—in sequential, chronological time, in particular—and our being anchored in time can also hold us into yet another comment that I've caught myself saying more frequently these days, especially when speaking to colleagues who appear younger than me, “I may be dating myself when I say this...” [culture club].
2. If you can relate with this image, then, I suppose, you can relate with the people in Jesus' hometown. Unlike our contemporary sense of mobility—the ability to move with ease through neighborhood and social circles—people in Jesus' time pretty much stayed put. If we believe modern studies about the historical Jesus, Jesus himself may be more mobile than most, given his trade as a carpenter. We're told that as a carpenter, Jesus likely did not have his own shop like we see in some romanticized religious paintings. No; Jesus and his father, Joseph, were probably more like folks who drive around nowadays with their tools in tow. With Jesus' greater mobility, likely he also got greater exposure to towns and peoples far different from the inhabitants of his backwater town in Nazareth.
3. I invite us to delve a little deeper on the experience of Jesus' townsfolk because I think it gives us spiritual insights into our own encounters with God—especially during those moments when God is breaking forth the ways of the kingdom to us in environments way too common or far too

ordinary for our liking. In our spiritual journey, I think, there's a temptation for us to relegate God's activity into those faraway places—like when we go on retreat or a pilgrimage. Surely God cannot do anything here in Hatboro, or Southampton or Willow Grove... We're too ordinary for that.

4. But the God in whom we believe—like it or not—is the God of the ordinary. Even from the time of the Exodus, God dwelt in a tent of meeting in the midst of the people wandering in the desert. Remember how God questioned even King David when he guilty that he was living in a house of cedar yet God dwelt in a tent? Jesus' dialog further expands on the thought of the ordinariness and even accessibility of God when he mentioned how healing during prophetic times were not exclusive to the territories occupied by the people of the covenant but in fact extended to people (non-believers actually) beyond the known tribes of Israel.
5. The rage of the people, however, were likely not just because they perceived Jesus as mocking their parochialism by quoting to them the miracles done for foreigners by Elijah and Elisha. They knew about these from their own study of the prophets. No. I believe their rage for Jesus is rooted in something far deeper. When Jesus—Joseph's son—returns to Nazareth after being tempted in the desert, and he points out to them their seeming lack of hospitality for one of their own, it was as if Jesus held up a giant mirror before them—for the people to realize collectively that what their forebears in faith did to the prophets of old, they were now doing to one of their own—and this may be the reason why Jesus can pass through their midst and go away. It's as if Jesus looked at them eye-to-eye and they, in turn, looked back at Jesus—and all those recollections of "I remembered you when you were this tall," came rushing back. The people realized that they were capable of. They also likely realized that, deep down, they were NOT their ancestors—that they, themselves, were part of the people to whom Jesus is bringing good news; that, at that moment, they were the people whose sight is being recovered, the people who are facing liberation and a new realization of the Lord's favor—and that yes, it was happening at that moment in time!
6. This Epiphany Sunday, the Lord's manifestation comes to us in the form of our own discovery of our truer selves—when God opens our eyes to accept the reality of who and what we are in the midst of our limitations; and it is also a revelation that challenges us not to impose our limitations and

limited perspectives on others. My inability to understand the complexity of another person's life—of what led them to where they are or how they're moving on and, perhaps, even making strides towards their chosen direction... my inability to understand that completely is on me; and is likely a challenge for me to further my horizons. After all, it is, often times, when we broaden our horizons that we also truly appreciate the immense depth, height and breadth of God's wisdom and purpose. Just imagine, God does not turn to us as we move through the different chapters of our life and tells, us, "I remember you when you were this small..." The God in whom we believe is very much a God of the present; who reveals God's name as "I will be who I will be," a God of infinite possibilities and potentials.

7. The call of the Prophet Jeremiah from the First Lesson is not just a reminder that God calls anyone into relationship with him; and even calls them to speak on his behalf. Now—admittedly, calls from God can be anxiety provoking. Parochialism, after all, is not just directed towards our limited understanding of our environment; it also extends inwardly—when we, at times, fear to go into those reaches of our memory or consciousness that may be too hurtful or even traumatic. But other equally important lesson from the call of Jeremiah is God's statement, here taken from the *Contemporary English Version* of the Bible, "*I am giving you the words to say.*" In other words, the God who calls us into relationship is not just sending us on our way. No; God is also accompanying us; journeying and tarrying with us. God is not like the infamous presidential speech-writer who gives the president a few lines to warm him up and then says, "you're on your own, kid." God, instead, is one who calls us into relationship with him and sustains us. As the Psalmist says today, "*I have been sustained by you ever since I was born; from my mother's womb you have been my strength*"—and part of the divine sustenance is to assure us that in him we have our hope and that—even in our limitations—we are well-beloved.
8. And how God tarries with us is by speaking to us in the language of love. Now, let's be clear: the immediate context of this text in Church at Corinth (among our spiritual ancestors there) is in fact that exact opposite: the lack of love—or, more precisely, another form of parochialism: that form that tends to be misguided because one aspect of the truth is taken to some extreme it does not belong. In the case of the Corinthian church: the issue of spiritual gifts (speaking in tongues, prophecy, etc). Some members were

apparently so proud of their gifts, they thought their own gift as so superior to others—to the detriment of the body of believers. The first part of the Epistle is a repudiation of that immediate context: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

9. The immediate context can be applicable to us: many times, in doing the spiritual works of the church, we can get caught up in the doing or the performance and miss out on the underlying reason (the love of God and the love of neighbor)... and in these cases our ministry gets reduced to just another social service, as important as that may be.
10. When I say that God is speaking to us in the language and ways of love, what I'm referring to is in the second half of the Epistle lesson—how God demonstrates patience with us; how God does not rejoice in our wrongdoing but calls us constantly to truth; how God remains our constant companion through life. Now God's language of love, as you may imagine, necessarily extends to others, that is in the way we form our relationship with those around us. Perhaps it is the language of love that we use intentionally when our limitations prevent us from understanding others. After all, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. And this is equally important—it also extends to how we treat ourselves: that there is a benefit that we extend to ourselves a level of forgiveness and understanding—that while all of us have histories of one kind or another; that we are not confined to our histories. As St Paul says, *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.* An essential part of our relationships—with God and with others and with ourselves—is that of growth and dynamism—of movement; and because that movement does not always happen in straight lines, we need in large portions the patience that comes from love.
11. And so this day, as Jesus holds a mirror before us—the mirror that shows us what we're capable of as children of God—Jesus also reminds us very firmly of who we are: that we are people—individuals called by God into holy relationship with him; people to whom God speaks his words of love; people who God expects to grow and mature until they realize that though they have much faith and even a greater amount of hope—that the greatest of God's gifts for them is love.

12. And to the God who is the love be honor and glory now and forever.
AMEN.