

Sunday January 31st, Epiphany 4
Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Co 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30
The Rev. Fanny Belanger

*No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown,
No prophet is welcomed in the prophet's country.*

This saying is so well-known that we could almost forget it's an original saying of Jesus. Each time I hear it, I almost feel Jesus is quoting a famous proverb, a traditional piece of wisdom. To tell the truth, I don't even really pay attention to it as "Sacred Scripture" anymore. Yet, this a saying that is so central to our faith that is to be found in each of the four Gospels: Mark 6, Matthew 13, John 4 and Luke 4 – our reading today. So I guess we need to find out what it really means.

Of course, I would like to believe that it means that when you leave your hometown or come to a foreign country it can easily turn you into a prophet. What your relatives, and friends and colleagues don't get about you they will automatically get, in a foreign land, and discover what a brilliant person you are, right away.

Yet, my experience – and I guess it's also yours as long as you've been traveling the slightest bit - is that being in a foreign country does not make you particularly smart. Actually, most of the time you feel pretty silly. You're not fast enough to jump in conversations, you don't have enough context to pick up on jokes, you lose your way when you drive downtown and you don't know where you are allowed to park, you read the paper and understand nothing about what's going on with these elections, you watch the sport on TV and you have no idea what they are all trying to do with this ball.

No, the only real chance you get to look smart when you're not in your hometown or in your own country is that you see things for the first time your eyes are wide open and you experience the world in a whole different perspective.
A perspective that can lead you to awe and wonder
A perspective that can also lead you to ask embarrassing questions.

The 2nd year I was at the seminary, I was part of a small committee welcoming international students. We were to meet with students from Haiti in the refectory and one of them ended up arriving very late at our meeting. He apologized saying that, as he heard we were meeting for lunch, he had been walking all across campus to find where the bone-fire was set for the cooking. Of course, as a bunch of Westerners, we could not help chuckling I mean – it was so unexpected. But one of us was kind enough to explain with great pride that in US everything was electric: We had electric ovens and stoves, electric refrigerators, electric dishwashers, electric A/C and heaters... That's when the student asked: "But how would you manage, if the electricity stopped working?" That's when we did not feel that smart anymore, that's when he started sounding like a prophet to us.

What would it look like if we'd look at our hometown
at our country
at our own lives
if we'd look at them with the eyes of a foreigner
if we'd look at them for the first time?

In this context of our annual meeting, I was especially thinking when I prepared this sermon
at how it would look like if,
instead of looking at our church with the eyes of those who have been a member for years, for decades,
or even over the generations,
we would look at our church as if it was for the first time?
What would stir awe in us? What would disappoint us? What would we like to change?
And imagine we're not even a Christian,
What would we think our church says about God?
And imagine we're homeless,
What would we think our church says about charity?

Jesus comes to his hometown,
to his own place of worship – the synagogue -
not as one who owns the place
but as the one who wants to adopt the point of view of the outsider
which makes him both naive and prophetic.
And the thing is:
The questions he raises are so embarrassing
that he ends up rejected – and almost killed.

Jesus is not welcomed in his hometown,
in his own place of worship.
But actually it's not about Nazareth that we're talking about today.
Today, maybe we could think God's country is Palestine, or US, or Africa
or we could think Jesus's hometown is the Vatican or Jerusalem.
But really, Jesus's hometown is the church.
Jesus's hometown is the church.
And it is too often that Jesus is not welcomed in his own country.

Oh sure – people welcome him, at first.
We miss the first part of the reading but actually, Jesus reads from Isaiah's scroll:
*The Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind.*
And Jesus says: *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*
And so people are so excited, you see.
Their eyes are bright with expectation.
Really, little Jesus, the son of Joseph, is going to do all of that for us?
That's too good to be true.
Jesus is the liberator
and we his relatives, his friends,
surely, we will share the throne.

But Jesus
disappoints them
because in the same time he winds up the scroll he says to the assembly that
he is not going to do any miracles for his hometown.
He has come for the widows, the lepers, and the foreigners.
Imagine your brother wins the lottery and he decides to give everything to charities.

And so people who want to love Jesus
end up rejecting him
when they hear what he truly have to say.

And so I was wondering:
In Jesus's hometown today, in our churches today,
Why is it so difficult, why is it so hard, why is it so impossible to hear what Jesus really has to say?

Well, what does Jesus say to his own people?
In the synagogue, Jesus does not say
I will bring you peace
I will bring you comfort
Jesus says: *Come, follow me.*
Do the things I do, with me.
Bring good news to the poor
Proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind.
And they hate him for that.

Well, I think we have this same struggle in our culture today where spirituality is all about
inner peace, personal transformation and well-being.
It's complicated to understand that being a church, being a Christian
is not so much about sharing the comfort as it is sharing the burden.
Sharing the burden.
We're not here to watch the Scriptures happen,
we're here to make the Scriptures happen,
with Jesus,
for others, in our communities and in the world.

The thing is we are often tempted to make of our Christian churches
a safe place, a cool place,
welcoming, with friendship, coffee, culture, entertainment
but too often what starts with good intentions leads us to be stuck in our comfort zone
when church, really, it should be about Mission.
Mission:
Going out to the world and giving what we have been given.
It's not about what God is going to do for us,
it is about what we are going to do with God.
If we are really friends with God, we don't only share the joy
we share the burden
And we wonder: What is Jesus's burden in our community? And in our world?
And what are we going to do about it?

If you remember our introduction to Luke's Gospel a few months ago,
we learned that this Gospel
is the Gospel of the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten.
And as an example, we talked about the Parable of the Prodigal Son.
We said that the Gospel of Luke is this opening to the second son,
not the legitimate – Israel -
but the ones who are far away: the nations
the foreigners
these people people don't think of as God people.

And yet.
Yet, if you remember the story of the prodigal son
the story is all about the second son, right,
but if you pay attention, the story is told for the first son - so that he may understand,
 he, the closest one
 the favorite
 the elected
 the one who shares everything with his Father
 - even the burden of the everyday labor.

Well, I think that even though the Luke's Gospel is all about the little ones
it's still a story that is told for the first ones
the elected
It's for the hometown – if you will.
But what the Gospel tells us is that in God's sight
we are not the elected to be the privileged, we are the elected to be the given away
we are to be the sacrament of love in this world
with Jesus
and if love is all what Paul promises us it is
 Love will be our only price and our only consolation.

So today,
let's be foreigners in our country
let's look at our church with awe but also with honesty and expectation and better hopes
not so much for ourselves
but for the ones we so often forget in our society.

It's not going to be easy,
but this is why the Lord has formed us, consecrated us and appointed us
like he did for Jeremiah.
It's an honor yes, and yet
it's also our duty and our cross.
If you pay attention, you'll notice our Gospel today is a mirror of the crucifixion:
“Doctor cure yourself!” a foretelling of the: “He saved others, can't he save himself?”
and his own people try to kill him.
And yet Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.
So may our churches
- and our church among them -
be, in spite of all, a testimony that today Jesus is still on his way. Amen.