

Homily, St. Andrew's (AGM Sunday)
Epiphany 4C, Jan 31, 2016
Luke 4:21-30

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Have you ever wanted to throw a preacher off a cliff?!

I was once so... let's say "annoyed"... with a preacher that I got up and left the room before the sermon was concluded. I didn't make a scene but I did huff and puff a bit in a separate space before a friend came to help calm me down. When I was sure the sermon was done, I returned to participate in the rest of the service. I admit I might have wanted to throw that preacher off a cliff! So... Have you ever wanted to? I suspect for at least some of you, a particular experience comes to mind. This week a colleague warned: make sure they know it's just a rhetorical question! But perhaps not... Let's come back to it in a few minutes...

Today we hear the second half of the scene that began last Sunday. It's the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and during Jesus' travels, he finds himself in his hometown of Nazareth on the Sabbath. In the synagogue, he reads from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he 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, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Then he goes on say, as we hear today: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The reaction of the crowd is, at first, one of impressed amazement at his gracious words. This is Joseph's son... our hometown boy... doing so well and making us proud! Maybe they see themselves in Jesus' reading, as the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed... those whom God favours and whose blessing is for them.

Jesus should just be pleased... he should say "thank you for the kind words" and leave it at that! But that's not Jesus what does. Instead, he puts words in the mouths of the crowd. He expects them to want miracles. And he expects that he will not be accepted in his hometown. And he goes on, provoking the crowd with stories from their own history of God's kindness and grace to outsiders and foreigners, rather than to the people of Israel! It seems such an odd and foolish approach to take... things were good. The people were happy. So why would Jesus provoke them to murderous rage by highlighting stories of God favouring Gentiles in their history?!? Jesus quickly dispels the crowd's notion that God's blessing would be poured out on them alone with a prophet arising from their midst. Instead Jesus seems to point to something larger, a broader mission from God, that would include others beyond their immediate community. The people hear Jesus and react with rage, driving Jesus out of town to the brow of a hill, so they might hurl him off the cliff... and so we return to our initial question: have you ever wanted to throw a preacher off a cliff?

The question is not strictly rhetorical, but it's also not a general invitation to stories from long ago. I want to take a moment to consider together where we have come from and where we are today here at St. Andrew's... thinking about just this past year, 2015... what stands out to you? What has changed and in that, what moment or experience comes to mind as difficult? The

metaphor of “throwing the preacher off a cliff...” is an extreme one, meant to spur our reflections... so it might not mean such a dramatic reaction!

[stories...?]

In our passage today, Jesus doesn't offer any further explanation to the crowd. In the midst of their strong reaction, he somehow passes through the midst of them and goes on his way - on to the next town. Jesus doesn't explain further, but I'd like to! Much of my approach since arriving here has been to intentionally unsettle and discomfort. I've not wanted to provoke rage like that of the crowd in our story, but to be too settled, too sure that we are the ones whom God alone favours... this does not lead to growth. And so a little dis-ease, a little trouble is needed.

I tend to be a physical person and I like physical metaphors. The one that I come back to over and over when I think about church is what I learned when I broke my arm. A few years back I slipped and fell and broke the radius bone just above my left wrist. When the cast came off after about 6 weeks, the doctor declared my arm healed. But he was wrong. The bone had rebuilt, sure, but while the bone was healing, all the soft tissue atrophied, so at the end of 6 weeks, my arm was skinny and weird-looking - like it belonged to an alien. More importantly, I could barely move my wrist at all without serious pain. I went to physio where I was told it would take a minimum of 3 months to get function back... more like 6 months to a year - and significant effort - for full strength to return. This means that the rehab phase of healing is a bare minimum of 2 times (more like 4 to 8 times!) the time of the initial, cast-phase of healing.

I think it's a good metaphor for where we are as church, and more importantly, to my approach as priest here. This is not a broken church. Whatever ruptures there may have been in the past have healed. But not unlike the broader mainline church, a kind of stasis has developed. Whether by needed stability to heal a specific hurt, or just a gradual decline of movement, the church gets stuck. We call it “the way we've always done things”... or “the people who have always done [fill in the blank]...” Getting unstuck can be difficult and sometimes painful work but every step we take... every adaptation we make... every new person our community welcomes... every change we embrace... is a small victory. Mostly what it takes is determination. The good news is that we are in the rehab phase of living into the fullness of life God calls us to. The even better news is that the more we grow accustomed to moving a little differently... the more we develop greater communal strength and flexibility through hard work, a little risk and minor discomfort... the easier it is the next time, more gracefully we can navigate new challenges and the broader our capacity to embrace opportunity.

I work with a trainer now and I'm learning to weight-lift. Twice recently, he has specifically challenged me with increasingly heavier weight. He asks me to do an exercise, I do it, and then he adds weight... I do it again and feel very pleased that I managed it... and then he adds more weight. When I push back “hey! I thought we were done!” He replies: “If you keep doing it, I'm going to keep adding weight!” So basically, he pushes me to lift until I fail. Except it's not really failure because I end up doing more than either of us thought I could.

This is what we also have to look forward to this year and in the years to come! We have come a long way... there is much to celebrate from this past year, and there is much still for us to do! For instance, two weeks from today we will enter the wilderness of singing a full, new liturgy. We're not doing it because there's anything wrong with what we have been doing. We're

doing it to develop greater capacity to learn new things. We're doing it expand our repertoire. We're doing it to find out what different words or different music might touch or inspire in us. Next Saturday we're hosting a public forum on physician-assisted dying. It is not to say that this is **the** right issue, or **the** right avenue of mission or ministry. More important than the topic is the experience of intentionally seeking to engage in public dialogue about something that matters. It's about intentionally involving ourselves in the wider community, and seeing what comes of it. It's about actively seeking what broader community needs might be out there and what our role can be in improving our little corner of the world, for those most in need.

In the study series last spring *Animate: Faith*, I was particularly struck by one presenter's summary of the Christian life as: Grounded in tradition; centred in worship; called to serve; free to dream. I think the order matters and it's a good summary of our big picture direction. We spent several months grounding ourselves in our Anglican tradition and history over a year ago. This past year we've focused in a number of ways on our worship practice. These efforts will continue with the added focus this year of exploring what it means to be called to serve. There isn't a specific program worked out (yet!) but rather it will serve as a theme with the aim to grow in our understanding of God's mission. It's about getting out to meet our neighbours and inviting them in, like we're doing next Saturday. What else might it mean? We'll be working on that together along the way.

There is much to celebrate in our life together today. It's okay if we feel uncomfortable, challenged, even angry at times. Those difficult moments give us the opportunity to be curious and to grow. The good news is through every season, Jesus is in the midst of us... sometimes provoking, sometimes reassuring and always loving us. And so let's respond to Jesus' faith in us by re-committing ourselves to our baptismal covenant...