

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany—Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Welcome to the second week in a row where our Gospel story centers around Jesus in a synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, preaching and teaching. Like last week, Jesus is preaching to the leaders and members of the synagogue in language familiar to them—the stories of the prophets of the Old Testament. Last week, he quoted Isaiah. This week he references Elijah and Elisha. The setting is the same, though the people's reactions to his message differ greatly.

You might remember that last week, the Gospel story ends with this way: *And [Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* Beautiful, yes? In fact, it's so pretty, I noticed that it was quoted on the marquee at the church down the street.

This week, things end a little differently. Today, the scripture ends with, *They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.* I have a feeling that this quote won't find itself on any church signs.

But maybe it should. I suppose if we want to have truth in our advertising, we should say the truth: that sometimes when we preach a gospel of grace, we will be met with pleasant interactions. But sometimes when we preach a gospel of grace, we will be run out of town. That has been the experience of Christians since the very first people even began to call themselves Christians. And nothing is too much different today.

I was having lunch the other day with a retired Bishop from the Diocese of Eau Claire—Bp. Ed Leidel. We were getting to know each other and doing all the necessary, “Where are you from? What brings you to Milwaukee? Etc. Etc.. And I mentioned to him that I was raised in the Lutheran church and only became an Episcopalian when I was a young adult. He thought this was a little bit interesting, or at least pretended to, and asked me if I thought that my Lutheran upbringing influenced how I practiced my religion today. I thought for a minute and then responded, “yes.” I told him that I sometimes think I preach like a Lutheran. And the retired Bishop said, “How does someone preach like a Lutheran.” And I said, “well, I preach about God's grace a lot, and I almost never quote the New York Times.” Bp. Leidel laughed and then said that, if we're going to preach one thing only, God's grace seems to be a good topic to pick.

I agree, but here's my issue today: I read today's Gospel over and over again, and I have a hard time seeing grace in it. Jesus goes before the people in his hometown, he preaches to them about God's justice and mercy, and they run him nearly off a cliff. This does not seem like Good News to me. In fact, it seems decidedly like Bad News.

But my little Lutheran heart won't let me stop looking for grace, so I read the story a few more times. And on further reflection, I noticed something surprising and powerful.

There Jesus is, on the cliff above the town of Nazareth. The people are there, steaming mad and, one assumes, carrying pitchforks and torches. "Throw him off the cliff!" "Throw him off the cliff!" They chant. And you know what? Jesus gives them the slip. In the story, it actually says this, *But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

And I think that's the good news for this morning. That no matter what kind of reception you are met with as you go into the world to preach the Gospel of Christ—no matter if they love you, or if they hate you—you will always have the power to move on and to preach another day.

When the people of the synagogue were kind to Jesus, he didn't stop preaching God's love and justice. When the people of the synagogue were nasty to Jesus, he didn't stop preaching God's love and justice.

So, no matter what response we think we might receive in this town, my friends, we are going to go out there and preach good news. We will preach a God of love and of compassion. We will preach justice to the corrupt and mercy to the downtrodden. And we will not do it with a particular response in mind. We will do it because we are followers of Jesus. And, really, if things get a bit rough, we will give our detractors the slip, just like Jesus did, so that we can be around to preach another day.

St. Mark's Episcopal church is about to have its 123rd Annual Meeting—give or take. That means that this place has been preaching good news to the city of Milwaukee for over a century. And we need to make sure that we are well positioned to keep preaching for the NEXT 123 years. And to do that, we need to follow the example of Jesus—to preach without reference to the reactions that we may or may not receive out in the community. We know that Christians are a little strange. We're always talking about love and justice and mercy and compassion. The world out there doesn't always like to talk about those things. They like to ignore injustice, or poverty, or hunger. But not us. We keep bringing it up, because we are followers of a God who is always concerned with the plight of those on the margin. And God has given us a good word to preach. Even when our neighbors love us. And even when our neighbors think we are crazy and want to run us off a cliff. It doesn't matter. We have a truth that needs to be spoken, and we will continue to do it for generations to come. Amen.