

Sermon: Year C, 4 Epiphany
Texts: Jeremiah 1:4-10
I Corinthians 14:12b-20
Luke 4:21-32

The Bible is a very strange book, and, properly, it should be acknowledged to be as strange as it is. It is the most owned book in the world, but, by all evidence, one of the least read – even, dare I say, among Episcopalians. Many of the stories are familiar, but that familiarity often fails us, because the most important aspect of the Bible's strangeness isn't that it tells exotic stories. The Bible's central importance is how it *makes strange* so many of the things we trust most or simply take for granted. It's a text that surprises; it challenges our deepest assumptions and our firmest convictions. To read it well requires that we look not for what we expect but for those statements and occurrences where, suddenly, without warning, something profoundly unusual is said or done, something that disrupts the normal chain of our expectations.

The passage read from Luke this morning is a perfect example. It is, in part, a story about fury, the kind of rage that, once begun, surges with increasing excitement toward its ultimate conclusion in violence and tragedy. Just when Jesus had impressed the crowd that had gathered around him in the synagogue; just when they were openly wondering whether this was, indeed, the great day of promise for them; at this peak moment, he suddenly erases all their hopes by making several withering comments, noting that when God's favor comes, it generally comes to those who expect it least. And he did not mean them.

They were caustic remarks, which resulted in an explosion of anger. When criticism is personal, when it touches on matters of faith and destiny, that mix is highly volatile. Infuriated, the crowd rushed out of the city with Jesus in their grasp, intent on throwing him off the nearest convenient cliff. All the momentum was moving swiftly and forcefully in one direction.

Then, strangely, at the very edge of both the cliff and impending harm, this great wave of anger stops. No explanation is given. No voice of conscience cries out. The madness just ceases – and Jesus, calmly, walks away, passing through the very crowd that so wanted to hurt him. It's a scene that demands the imagining of it, as if it were a film, not just a sentence in a text. How did that happen? How was this tragedy averted? How did Jesus stop the very impulse that, on so many different levels, we seem perpetually incapable of reining in? If you want a real miracle story, forget about water and wine; ponder instead such rage dispelled, without residue.

Had this been our story, had we written it, Jesus would have been hurled from the precipice, with a sense of good riddance. The crowd would have roared its glee and satisfaction. And Jesus might have become just one more of millions whose lives are senselessly threatened or taken – one more in the pitiful sum of the world's victims. Reading the statistics, someone might note, under the heavy shadow of resignation, that this is what happens amongst us. So it was. So it is. So it goes.

Jesus, however, refused this violence. He did so inexplicably. He didn't opposed it, lashing out or striking back. He didn't defeat all those around him, marching forth, playing the victor. He didn't engage a battle. According to Luke, he simply chose to be loosed from the maelstrom of the crowd's wrath – as if it were naught. How strange this is.

He refused an ugly fate for himself. He refused to allow the people their own blind involvement in one more tragedy. He refused to be one more casualty of our temper, our spite, or the sad inevitabilities of our weakness. He walked away and, thereby, he made the

story his own. He walked through the flanks of the very people who so wanted to dispose of him, and thereby, he gave them a new and opposite freedom. He reversed course, not only physically, himself, but, more dramatically, he broke the long and harsh line of our anger. Suddenly, strangely, he opened another, different opportunity. Luke tells the story with so that we might consider this a possibility: so it can be.

It must be added that this story in Luke doesn't stand alone. It is matched, later on, by another event, similar in type but even stranger in outcome. In this latter story, the crowds succeed. Jesus is led out of the city of Jerusalem to his death on Golgotha, accompanied by great shouts and chants of ridicule. A thief, hanging on a cross next to him, speaks, taunting Jesus, telling him that if, in fact, he is God, he ought to save himself. He ought to step down from his cross and walk away. He tells Jesus that he should save him too. He should refuse the crowd the satisfaction of their vengeance and anger. The echo is clear. Jesus should stop this tragedy; he should deny the authorities; he should release all the people again from the dreariness of their wrath and indignant judgment.

This time, however, Jesus allows the crime. He stops nothing, and God himself falls, to darkness. The tomb is sealed: the tomb that marks the certainty of Jesus' death, and, just so, the tomb that shows the hopeless inevitability of our anger leading to destruction. So it goes, indeed.

But this second story has not yet reached its conclusion. It's even stranger than the first, because, as we as Christians proclaim, the tomb is not its ending. After a time of waiting, allowing us, once again, to squelch hope under the heavy weight of stony resignation, God's resurrection interrupts the very things of which we are most certain. Release comes, even from the complete nothingness of death. The stone is rolled away. Jesus walks back into the realm of the living. He breathes peace. He proclaims forgiveness. And thereby, he reverses the course of all life. Life does not end dimly, in ending, he declares. It culminates in freedom from all tragedy and resignation – for the story of us is God's to tell, not ours to finish, sadly.

Two thousand years later, what are we to make of these two connected stories? They provide us reason for concerted reflection, in part, because we are informed that our own rage need never consume us. In spite of all its fervor, it is, in truth, empty. The greater revelation, though, is that rage is not the only reality that moves toward emphatic conclusion. As anger surges toward its fatal end, so too, in an opposite direction, the grace of God surges forward, with greater strength – not toward tragedy but, more brilliantly, toward reconciliation and the embodiment of a visible peace. By providing two accounts that complement each other, Luke informs us that this peace can be claimed anytime, ultimately, yes – and in the meantime too, even in the times that are extraordinarily mean.

This is not just theoretical talk. These are not stories that soothe for a moment but are easily crushed by experience, when life seems to have no grace at all. As we know, several months ago a small community of the Amish suffered disaster in its most anguishing sense – dis-astor: which means an event of such darkness and disorientation that even the stars (astor) no longer provide a sense of place or direction. For many, it was one more incident that could only be met by resignation, one more shooting in a school, one more senseless tragedy. At that time, the Amish amazed everyone by their calm, their stability in grief, their refusal to meet violence with anger, by their desire to dissolve excuse for hatred with surprising forgiveness.

In the time since, however, what they have not done is equally important. They have not altered their own community. They have not passed new laws or imposed strict procedures regarding their common habits. They don't approach others with suspicion. The doors to

their schools are not framed with metal detectors. They don't practice school lock-downs as we do in Old Lyme. They have not ramped up fear in the effort to guarantee safety. They have not hired lawyers to pursue recompense as a reward for their trauma. None of this is of any interest to them. It is as nothing.

They have chosen, rather, and from long ago, to center their lives outside this cycle of violence. They live, I think it can be duly said, instead, in the specific space between Luke's two stories of God made manifest in Jesus. Thus they walk in a different direction. They are loosed from many of the things that bind us. People find them strange. The Amish sometimes amuse us by their simplicity, their seeming lack of desire to race with the rest of the world chasing acquisition and material delights. But their finest and truest strangeness is their evocation of grace precisely where we might find none at all. God's grace, through Scripture, has *made them strange*, but here it's a strangeness of immense loveliness and beauty.

Now that is something we can easily admire, from a distance, as if this were exceptional. But the invitation of God, given us by Luke in Jesus, is for us to see this as our norm, too – a compelling strangeness which, in its fullness, we can share – such oddness that love dispels all anger, without residue; such oddness that when others see us they see peace, and they then want to walk that way too.

So it can be, if we read aright.

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