

February 3, 2019

Epiphany 4

**First Reading: Jeremiah 1:4-10**

<sup>4</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

<sup>5</sup>“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

<sup>6</sup>Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” <sup>7</sup>But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

<sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the LORD.”

<sup>9</sup>Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.

<sup>10</sup>See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.”

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### **Gospel: Luke 4:21-30**

<sup>21</sup>Then [Jesus] began to say to [all in the synagogue in Nazareth,] “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup>All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” <sup>23</sup>He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” <sup>24</sup>And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. <sup>25</sup>But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup>yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup>There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” <sup>28</sup>When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

A man one evening, after his wife left for a meeting, decided to take a quick shower. Though it was still early in the evening, he figured he would get this out of the way now, so that he could settle down and enjoy the rest of a quiet evening at home. The man was just stepping out of the shower when he heard the phone ring. It was his wife, she asked him to run down to the basement and turn off the iron she had accidentally left on. Worrying that he would forget about the task, and wondering how long it had been left on, he figured he better do it right away. Without bothering to grab a towel or robe, the man headed down to the basement. Just as he reached the bottom of the steps, all the lights came on and dozens of friends, neighbors, relatives and colleagues jumped out of their hiding places and shouted, "Surprise! Happy Birthday!" His wife had planned a surprise party for the man's 40th birthday.

Not all surprises are good ones, at least at first glance. Jesus had an uncanny ability to take people by surprise--and they were not always pleased about it. Take, for instance, the surprise Jesus sprung on the Nazarene congregation in the passage for today. This morning's Gospel lesson continues a passage in Luke that actually was begun in last week's text. This is the second part of this passage with verse 21 being in common for both Sundays. Jesus had returned to his hometown in Nazareth.

That Sabbath day, he went to the synagogue, as any observant Jew would. The synagogues of Jesus' day didn't usually have paid or appointed preachers and teachers. Any adult male might be called upon to read on any particular Sabbath. Can we imagine if we ran our churches that way? If any adult could be called upon at any time to read or teach on the Scriptures each Sunday? One of two things would happen if we followed that practice: there could be an explosion of Bible study in our congregation, or we would have a stampede of members missing worship.

Jesus was handed a scroll from the book of Isaiah and asked to preach on it. He didn't have to flip around for a while to find what he wanted. He went straight to Isaiah 61, a Messianic passage of great importance to the Hebrew people, and read these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And then, when Jesus was finished reading, he closed the scroll, sat down, and announced what has now become verse 21 in the chapter from Luke, the verse that ended last week's lesson and begins this week's; he says very simply, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This came as a great surprise to those gathered there that day. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew say that the people were astonished. Luke reports that they are amazed. Surprise! Say that again? The prophet Isaiah had been inspired to write those words more than 700 years earlier. For seven centuries, preachers and teachers of the holy word had preached on a soon-coming Messiah who would turn the world's systems upside-down. He would lift up the hurting, the oppressed, and the blind. The Hebrew people knew only too well what it was to suffer, to be held captive. They had waited hundreds of years for the fulfillment of this prophecy. And now a carpenter's son claims to be that Messiah who would "proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." How would we react if we were in their shoes? Is it any wonder that later on in this chapter we discover that the men of the synagogue try to kill Jesus? This is a surprise that first comes as blasphemy, but later would be recognized as blessing.

Often times what God has to say to us often surprises us. We come to hear God's word, whether it is church, our own private Bible Study, the reading books of prayers and inspiration, through prayer, or through our daily living, and often the Spirit of God can send us messages and guidance that we are surprised by. Sometimes those unexpected things are greeted with arms wide open. It is news of great joy. Still other times God's word

surprises us with astonishment. We, like the people gathered in the Nazarene congregation, are shocked by words and messages expressed to us that are actually reflective of God's direction for our lives.

Another way God surprises us is not only in what we are called to hear, but also in what we are called to say and do. In the Old Testament lesson we heard God's call on Jeremiah, a young man from a priestly family. As the son of a priest, Jeremiah was expected to enter the priesthood. The priests were the bridge between the people and God. Priests taught the Law and guarded the covenant between Israel and God. They offered incense and offerings on God's altar on behalf of the people. Although the priesthood required work and responsibility, the position had its perks too. Priests were highly respected. They had an honorable and secure place in society. But Jeremiah never got to experience the joys of the priesthood. God had other plans for his life. When he was young Jeremiah is called to be a prophet. Nobody likes prophets. They often tell people the stuff they don't want to hear. This is not at all the type of ministry that Jeremiah was looking forward to, and our first lesson this morning tells of his initial resistance to this call.

The reality is that in this life, no matter if we are just hearing, no matter if we are just speaking, and no matter if we are just doing,

God can and often will surprise us by revealing a direction, a path that we did not expect to travel or follow. How do we react? Has God ever done that to you? Changed your plans in midstream? Shaken you up and turned you around and set you on an unexpected road? Or has God ever called you to do something you were absolutely, positively sure you just couldn't do?

What has the Spirit of God been saying to you? What is it that you are feeling nudged to say or to do because of God's influence? What are our excuses?

Once a little boy came home from church looking visibly upset. His mother asked what was wrong. "We learned a stupid song in Sunday School today." "What was the song?" the mother asked. "It says Jesus wants us to be his sunbeam." "What's stupid about that?" said the mother. "Because," the little boy fumed, "I don't want to be a sunbeam. I want to be a truck driver."

Sometimes we think we have everything all figured out, but God calls us to do something different. The prophet Jeremiah's excuses are no different from our own excuses. The bottom line is we all have had the guts to tell God in certain and varying ways, that we think God is wrong, that God certainly doesn't really want me to do that. But whatever the challenge, whatever the task, we cannot forget the cross event of Christ, that guarantees that our faith will connect us with God, that guarantees a forgiveness of

sin, that guarantees a continual presence in our lives, no matter what happens. God's promise of presence with each of us through the wide gates and the narrow alleys of life has been assured. In the resurrection of Christ, this scripture has been fulfilled. Amen