

Hometown Preacher

Going home to preach as Jesus did in a way reminds me of what I'm doing now. I didn't actually grow up at Trinity Cathedral, as many of you know. But I did arrive here nearly forty years ago as a skinny, dark-haired, brand new assistant professor of biology at St. Ambrose College. Because Raisin and I sing, we were immediately caught up in the cathedral choir. Choirs are one of the most effective community-building parts of any church. That lasted for some sixteen years before we left.

Many of you also know the story about how I came back. A painful process of finding a new Dean resulted in Bishop Scarfe sending five names to the search committee, mine being one of them. Somehow I rose to the top, was called, and said yes. The lectionary readings on my first Sunday didn't include the passage from Isaiah 61 that we just heard Jesus quote. In fact, in that Sunday's Gospel Jesus predicted his arrest and death, not the most auspicious verses for a new Dean.

I feel like I should be able to relate to today's passage from Luke, yet I can't. For one thing, the reason Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit was because he had just bested the devil after forty days of temptation. And we're talking about *Jesus*, after all, not a former teacher who traded plant stories for Bible stories. Jesus carefully chose his preaching text, one that he knew would turn everyone's heads around. Next week we'll hear the sequel. Unlike Jesus, I have little desire to make people so angry that they want to throw me off a cliff. God knows I already can be annoying enough.

So if I'm not Jesus in this story, then who am I? One of the people in the synagogue? Oh, that's getting a little too real. If I'm one of them, then I'm okay with Jesus as long as he doesn't rock the boat. He can be tame Jesus, buddy Jesus, the sweet little baby Jesus lying in the manger while we sing "Silent Night." If little Jesus is going to make big demands, I will either want to shut him down or go somewhere else.

That's the dilemma, isn't it? Jesus never leaves us where we're comfortable. I could have been like my St. Ambrose colleagues and hung on until 65, then retired. Instead Jesus said, I think you're finally ready to become a priest. After a few years of that, how about becoming the Dean at Trinity Cathedral and finding out what sitting in that chair feels like? All of this has convinced me that God has a sense of humor. Believe me, I don't always laugh.

It's a good thing that we don't often know where Jesus is leading us. And as I think about it, it's probably just as well that a person who's a known quantity, an old shoe one might say, is the Dean of Trinity Cathedral right now. The last two years in particular have been a rough ride, and I know many have appreciated a steady hand at the helm, even if you differ on which course to take. In spite of the pandemic we have accomplished a lot together. You'll have a chance to see that when you read the Annual Report for 2021 that will come out this week.

And maybe that's the real reason I have trouble seeing myself in today's reading. Gospel stories are necessarily about *Jesus*, front and center. Stories about the church shouldn't be stories about the priest or pastor or Dean, although they often are. They should be stories about *us*. We are all

in this together, young and old, rich and not so rich, maskers and anti-maskers and I-can't-wear-a-maskers, people of every political and theological persuasion. That's the point St. Paul makes when he talks about the Body of Christ. We are all baptized into one body. Christ is not divided, nor should we be. Our call is to work together for God's kingdom and the common good.

Next week we'll hear how the synagogue erupted as Jesus continued to talk. We'll also hear St. Paul's beautiful and glorious chapter on love from his letter to the Corinthians. That's the choice, isn't it? We can stop up our ears when Jesus speaks, or we can live in love. I know which one I want to do, and I know I need God's grace to do it. And that hasn't changed in forty years.

[Epiphany 4: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21.]