

Sermon for Sunday, January 31, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's always wonderful
when a child of the parish
returns.

You remember them when they were babies
bright-eyed with wonder at the color and sounds of worship,
occasional squawks during the service
and those first staggering steps
down the aisle.

And then wriggling in the pew,
the loud whispers,
and the fists full of cookies
at coffee hour.

Next thing you know
they are acolytes,
standing tall and responsible,
the only time
they are allowed to play with fire!

And then teenagers
slumped beside their parents
with apparently no interest in church at all
until they tell you how important it all is
when they are confirmed.

Then suddenly they are off to college
and their adult lives,
and the only time you see them
is when they are home for the holidays.

And then one day,
one day
one of them shows up
and asks if they
could preach.

And of course you say yes,
because you've heard they have been preaching in other churches,

and we all want to see
one of our own kids
made good,
and we're just so happy to see them.
And so when the time comes
they go up into the pulpit
and turn to the reading,
a passage from Isaiah,
and begin to speak.

“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 favor.”

And then they look up at all of you sitting there,
people that have been like grandparents to them, and friends, and honorary aunts and
uncles,
and some that they don't know,
newer members,
they look up at you and say,
“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”
Or,
in other words,
“This
was written about
me.”

And that's just the beginning.
It's an amazing sermon,
thoughtful and learned
and memorable.

You can imagine the conversations
at coffee hour.

Didn't he do a great job?

I wouldn't have expected it.
After all,
you remember his Dad.
Nice guy,
but we all thought the kids
would go on to some sort of trade.
Not this.

And what was it
that he said at the beginning?

And the comments that had begun with such approbation
would drift,
and question,
and finally
you'd begin to hear echoes around the room.
"Who does he think
he is?"

That's the story we heard today from the gospel, more or less.
It wasn't a church, of course,
but a synagogue,
and the grown child come home
was Jesus.

Nazareth
had been his home
ever since his father
had brought them back from Egypt
where they'd fled as refugees
from the dangerous anger of King Herod,
who had vowed to kill all baby boys born in Bethlehem
lest one of them
usurp his throne.

And everyone knew the family,
Dad, Joseph the carpenter,
Mom, Mary the dreamer,
and the kids,
Jesus, the first among them

who had always been
a little different.

Remember that time,
they said to one another,
Remember that time
when they went down to Jerusalem for the Passover
and he
got left behind?
And when they went back to find him
he was calmly sitting in the temple courtyard
talking about God
with the rabbis.
And him only twelve years old!

And didn't you hear about his cousin John?
Always a little strange, that one,
and going off to live out in the desert
when he had a perfectly good home with his family.
I heard he was down at the Jordan,
preaching at people and telling them to repent,
and washing them in the river,
as if we didn't have perfectly good ritual baths up at the temple.
And Jesus, he went down to visit his cousin,
and he got washed too,
and I've heard rumors
that there was some sort of rumble
and some people said it was God,
but I don't really believe it,
and next thing
Jesus headed out into the desert,
just like his cousin.
At least he had the sense to come home,
Six weeks
was enough for him.
But I've been hearing stories about him.
Over in Capernaum,
talking about God
as if he knew him.
Old Jeremiah,

who has trouble walking,
 he said Jesus prayed for him,
 and his legs suddenly became strong again.
 And little Naomi, who can't see properly,
 her parents said that Jesus prayed for her,
 and now she's looking around and clapping and smiling.

But we haven't seen anything like that.
 You'd think he'd at least
 come home first.
 Instead of to a bunch of strangers.
 I just don't know.

And who does he think he is, anyway?
 How could he be the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah.
 He's just a country boy
 whose parents weren't even married when he was conceived.
 God's not likely to choose him for the Messiah.
 And what sort of Messiah would he make, anyway.
 We need someone
 who will come and lead us,
 just like Moses did,
 and King David,
 someone who will get rid of the Romans
 and set us free.
 He won't be doing that.

In fact,
 you know,
 I wonder if it's all a plot. Maybe they let him go
 back when Herod was getting rid of all the babies.
 Maybe Joseph got safe passage for them
 by promising
 that Jesus would be trained up as a double agent.
 Incite us all to rise up against the Romans
 just
 so they could kill us all.
 All under the pretext
 of suppressing a revolution.
 We can't take the risk.

I don't trust him.
Let's get rid of him.

And what had begun as a happy homecoming for the hometown boy
became questioning
and then dissatisfaction,
and then a murderous
rage.

And they tried to force Jesus
over a cliff.
But he simply
walked
away.

It's not a very savory story, is it.
He is Jesus,
the one we know as the messiah.
And his own hometown
rejects him.

And they are not alone.
Later in the gospels,
we find Jesus mother and brothers coming after him,
saying he's crazy,
and wanting to take him home
for safekeeping.

Our traditions, the stories we grew up on,
our hymns,
often suggest to us
that Jesus was a gentle,
quiet, caring guy,
someone we would all love
as part of our families.

But in fact, the way the gospels tell it, he's not.
He's loud,
he's confrontative,
he makes trouble.
He's crazy.

Just look at his program,
the words that he chooses to use in his hometown
to define his mission.
He's going to bring good news to the poor.
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.
None of those things
were particular priorities for the people of Nazareth.

They weren't the poor, they weren't captives, they weren't the blind, they weren't particularly oppressed. They weren't any of those things.
They were just ordinary people
going about
their ordinary lives.

Jesus didn't come
for them.

And that's the heart of the problem.
You see, it wasn't, I suspect, it wasn't so much
that Jesus hadn't got around to doing any miracles in Nazareth that made his hometown mad at him,
or even that he was claiming to be the Messiah,
it was that the vision of God
that he had come to proclaim, the vision of God
that he had come to live out
was one where the attention
would always be
on others.

Where following him
meant giving up everything
and not counting the cost,
where following him
meant losing your life
in order to save it,
where following him

meant seeking not to be served
but to serve.

Jesus is crazy.
And we're called to be crazy with him.

Recently,
I've been reading this book by our new Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. The vestry is
inviting you all
to read it with us
during Lent - copies will be available to buy
after church.

In the introduction,
Bishop Curry writes,
"...the kingdom or reign of God, which Jesus talked about probably more than anything
else, is the realization of God's dream and vision for human life, human society, and all
of creation.

That dream of God is in part the motive for God's involvement and God's mission
in the life of the world, from the days of the Bible until now. That dream inspired the
Hebrew prophets, who used God's thunderous, "Thus said the Lord," to courageously
challenge injustice and mistreatment of the poor. That dream is the reason God came
among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who showed us the way to live beyond what
often are the nightmares of our worn sin-filled human design and into the direction of
God's dream. Over time I began to see that being a Christian is not essentially about
joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus,
taking his teachings seriously, letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives, and in so doing
helping to change the world from our nightmare into God's dream."

Every week, every day,
we pray,
"Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven."

And as we pray those words,
we are praying
that we will be

as crazy as Jesus,
bringing good news to the poor.
proclaiming release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
letting the oppressed go free,
making the dream of God
reality here in our church,
our community,
our world.