

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

January 30, 2022 – EPIPHANY 4C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Forward with Jesus*”\*

Jeremiah 1:4-10 (The Lord knows us before we are born, and has plans for us)  
Psalm 71:1-6 (God is our refuge and hope, for all our lives)  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (St. Paul extols the virtues of Christian love)  
St. Luke 4:21-30 (Jesus’ preaching in His hometown is not accepted)

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Today’s Gospel picks up where last week’s left off, with Jesus having unrolled the scroll of Isaiah that was handed to Him. He has just finished reading aloud: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives ... and recovery of sight to the blind...” After which, He boldly states: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Just as Jeremiah was consecrated and anointed as a prophet even before his birth, Jesus has been anointed by the Holy Spirit before *His* conception, to fulfill God’s mission in the world. Luke records that Jesus’ hearers were amazed and spoke well of Him.

Then, something seemingly out of character happens: Jesus starts berating the people of His hometown. This is rather odd, as Luke does not say they challenged or denounced Him, as compared to the accounts of this incident in Matthew and Mark. In those gospels, Jesus’ neighbors criticize Him for going beyond where they think His station in life should be, even though He has already performed great miracles all over Galilee. But in Luke’s gospel, Jesus hasn’t done any ministry yet, other than preach in His parents’ synagogue.

What makes this passage even stranger is that Jesus begins to yell at His Nazarene neighbors for demanding, “Do here in your hometown the things we heard you did at Capernaum.” O-kay. The problem is, in Luke, Jesus hasn’t been to Capernaum yet. He actually goes there next, after being chased out of Nazareth.

So, what’s going on here? We have Jesus seemingly unprovoked, verbally attacking His neighbors and referring to events in a town He hasn’t even visited yet. What is Luke doing? Since we don’t know, it’s best not to get bogged down in the chronological details. More important is that Luke has Jesus introducing a theme that will appear throughout Luke’s Gospel, as well in his Acts of the Apostles: That Jesus, the long-prophesied Messiah, has come to proclaim the Kingdom of God, here and now, and that it is open to *anyone* who believes in Him, no matter who they are.

Oh, but that wasn’t what Jesus’ hometown—or any Jewish community—wanted to hear. Inclusivity wasn’t part of their heritage. In fact, it was against their religion. As soon as Jesus ramps up for a sermon commentary about how the Gentile widow of Zarephath and the Arab general Naaman had greater faith and were more obedient to God than their fellow Jews, the people become violent and chase Jesus out of town, attempting to push Him off a cliff!

Imagine being told by some upstart you’ve known since he was a little kid, now telling you He’s the fulfillment of all God’s promises, of all the prophecies you—along with the entire nation—have waited so long to hear. And, this fulfillment is not just for you, or a select few, or a unique group—as you had expected.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that God is present to *all* who are lost, poor, and oppressed, to Jew or Gentile, enraged the people so much they wanted to kill Jesus then and there. Miraculously, He escapes their fury, and departs for Capernaum, where He becomes accepted as one who teaches with divine authority. Jesus’ breakaway from the angry crowd was not simply a fortuitous dodge. The Greek expression St. Luke uses for “went on His way” has the connotation of “going on,” as in “moving forward,” or “leaving the past behind.”

Interestingly, Capernaum was the hometown of Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew,<sup>2</sup> who would all become Jesus' disciples. In going to Capernaum, Jesus passes His mission on to His followers, and ultimately to the Church, and to us, right here in Compass. Jesus could have gotten stuck in the seeming failure of His ministry in Nazareth, even as we can become preoccupied with setbacks or losses in the life of our parish, forgetting that we go forward not under our own steam, but in the power of the Spirit. Jesus knew His ministry wasn't His mission, and it's not ours, either. It was—and still is—God's mission.

Jesus never returned to His hometown. He didn't need Nazareth to carry out His mission. He could not permit the narrow-mindedness of those who should have known better to interfere with why He came to earth. What they would probably never understand was that in the early Church, it would be the very hardships that the early followers of Christ suffered, the brutal persecutions designed to destroy them, that allowed them to fulfill God's mission and be lights to all the world.

All of this suggests that a true embrace of God's mission, a faithful vision of the future, may call us out of our comfort zones, may propel us into places we would not have asked for, or may direct us to paths we would not have walked, if given a choice. However, Jesus' example also affirms for us that if we have a clear sense of what we are to be about as Christians, and if we allow the Holy Spirit to lead and empower us, God *will* bring His future into the place where we are. That place may be far from either our hometown or our comfort zones.<sup>3</sup> But it will be good, because it will be God's!

As humans, we share a cognitive tendency to selectively remember the past as better than it was, especially when the present doesn't feel so good<sup>4</sup>—like now. Particularly in the Church, it can be easier to feel nostalgic about the past, about a time when we remember things being so much better, whether or not they were, or whether what we picture is simply the product of a highly embellished imagination.

Since we can never actually go back in time, our only option is to move ahead, to look forward, to go on.<sup>5</sup> In three of our Scripture readings for today, we are challenged by Jeremiah the prophet; Jesus, the voice of God; and St. Paul the Apostle, to step out and grab onto the new things God is doing—whether it be welcoming a prophetic word, receiving an unlooked-for spiritual gift, or embracing radical inclusivity.

Jesus shook up His hometown by telling stories from First and Second Kings that all pointed to where outsiders were helped by God—the insiders, not so much. St. Paul encourages us to ask the Lord for whatever spiritual gift will best help us in “building up the Church.” And Jeremiah models for us the courage to go where God says, and do what He wants.

As St. John's Church, we will do well to live fully in the present, and turn with hope toward the future, continuing down the road to which Jesus calls us: a path of unconditional hospitality; of welcoming all who need the spiritual home we can provide them; where our faith, worship, and service are truly universal and all-inclusive. Today's Scriptures encourage us not to wind the clock backward to an unreal past where things are remembered as being perfect, or even, just “better.”

Rather, this Gospel lesson takes us by the shoulders and gently shakes us, calling us to live *now* in the Kingdom of God that Christ proclaimed that day in Nazareth, and to move forward, led by the Spirit, even as Jesus did when He took off for Capernaum .... and for Jerusalem ... and for the Cross.

Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun and author, writes: “Change may frighten us, of course, but it may just as surely free us from our old selves and freshen us for life new-born. Change dusts off our dreams and explodes us into new beginnings.”<sup>6</sup>

May it be so, as we embark upon our sixth year together. *Thanks be to God!*

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “Onward and Forward,” 3 February 2013, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. “Luke 4:21-14,” [StThomasDC.org](http://site.stthomasdc.org/experience/sermons/304-article304/) <<http://site.stthomasdc.org/experience/sermons/304-article304/>> 3 February 2013.

<sup>3</sup> “Capernaum,” [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capernaum), 13 December 2021 <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capernaum>> 18 January 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Adapt. Dennis Bratcher, Christian Research Institute, qtd. [Synthesis, Year C – Epiphany 4](#) (3 February 2013), p. 3. Used with permission.

<sup>5</sup> Adapt. Charlotte Lieberman, “Why We Romanticize the Past: Ah, the good old days. Were they really that good?” 2 April 2021, [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/smarter-living/why-we-romanticize-the-past.html) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/smarter-living/why-we-romanticize-the-past.html>> 20 January 2022. Used with permission.

<sup>6</sup> Adapt. “Luke 4:21-14,” *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Joan Chittister and Mary Lou Kownacki, “In My Own Words,” *Spirituality&Practice* © 2006 <<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/18427/joan-chittister>> 18 January 2022.