

**January 28, 2007: Epiphany IV**  
**Luke: 4:21-30**

**Preached by Rev. Nancy B. Dilliplane at Christ Episcopal Church, Rockville, MD**

In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three, AMEN.

Last Tuesday, my husband, Steve and I indulged in our annual post-State-of-the-Union-Address ritual. After the Address and Response, we pop the movie “The American President” into the VCR, and, as we have for several administrations now, we fantasize about whether we’d be in better shape with Michael Douglas as president. Imagine a government with intelligent dialogue written by Aaron Sorkin, and directed by Rob Reiner!

Relax! This is not going to be a sermon about the state of the union: the place for that is in the Prayers of the People, and in our daily prayers—that all those who hold the reigns of authority and power in the world that they may be guided by a vision of justice, peace and the well-being of all peoples.

But I did watch the American President this week, and I was surprised to find in the dialogue of the movie a key that unlocked this week’s Gospel for me. In an early scene, a political analyst is being challenged to explain how the president’s approval rating can change so drastically from one day to the next when he really hasn’t done or said anything of note. The analyst looks up, and says, in all seriousness, “The country has mood swings.” Mood swings. As unscientific and unpredictable as that. The country has mood-swings.

Well today’s text from Luke is a Mood Swing text, if ever there was one. How else do you explain a crowd, who in a few short verses has turned from admiring families gathered for worship into a murderous mob?

The people have come to hear Jesus teach. They’ve heard reports of what he has done in other towns, how he has healed people, and how he teaches with a wisdom beyond his years. They’ve been hoping he would come home to Nazareth and speak in the synagogue where they knew him as a boy. They sit quietly while Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah and they wait eagerly to hear what he will say. He speaks of the grace of God which sets captives free, binds up the broken hearted, restores sight to the blind, and comes as good news to the poor, and then he concludes “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And the crowd is not disappointed, in fact, we are told that they all spoke well of him, and were amazed at Jesus’ gracious words! Jesus is a hometown boy made good, and Nazareth is proud of him. “This celebrated healer and rabbi is one of us, you know. Yes indeed, that’s Joseph’s son!” Verse 22.

And yet, by verse 29 this adoring crowd has risen against Jesus, with the intent of pushing him off the hillside to his death on the rocks below. What has happened? The synagogue has mood swings.

The church has mood swings, too you know. Throughout our history, congregations have come together to overthrow slavery, to route segregation, to rebuild neighborhood synagogues destroyed by anti-Semitism, or schools destroyed by hurricane winds, to provide healthcare for migrant workers. And these same congregations have been ready to do murder over new liturgies, who it is that may be ordained, moving the altar, replacing pews with chairs, the color of the carpet in the parish hall. Mood swings. How else do we explain it?

Well, I think that's what today's Gospel seeks to do. On the surface, it surely captures the extremes of human emotion, and our *lived experience* that accolades can turn to homicide in a matter of moments. Bu at a deeper level, this story gives an the explanation for this. At its heart this is a story of the tension between our longing to possess God, and keep the Divine with us, and God's longing to keep moving, and to keep us moving. A tension between human longing for stability, and a God who calls us always into new territory.

This is a tension that faces the church today, it faced the synagogue in Nazareth, it faced the people of Israel and Judah under the kings and prophets, and it confronted the People of God in the wilderness. On the one hand, we want to put down roots, to build tradition, to know ourselves as beloved of God, and to stop awhile and simply be in relationship with the Holy One. The problem is, that One is always moving on. We, who have been stopped in our tracks by Divine Grace, want always to remain in the place where God first came to us. Once we learn the truth, we seek to possess it, define it, contain it. The problem is, The Holy One ever refuses to be possessed, defined, contained. And so we, who claim to be Children of God, in this life, can never rest. And that, my friends, is enough to give even the most even-tempered of us mood swings.

Lets look again at the text. "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." It seems to me that Nazareth is asking for Jesus to stay a while. Stay and teach, stay and heal. Charity begins at home. You are one of us, you've come home, this is where you belong. Stay put. We need you. There are people in this very synagogue who need their sight restored, who need release, who have longed for the year of the Lord's favor. We believe in the life you are describing, and now that you've come home, we can have it!

But what does Jesus do? He brings them up short. He tells stories that imply God's grace is not to be kept at home, but poured out upon outsiders. In a time when there was famine, God's mercy was not reserved for the hometown crowd, but given to a poor, pagan widow. In the time of Elisha, healing came not to suffering Hebrew people, but to a Syrian servant. The One who is on the move does not remain among the chosen, but is made manifest, against all expectations, on the fringes and in the margins. Looking for God, the Hebrew people find that God has moved on. What a thing for Jesus to say to a people who have been waiting for him to come home! No wonder they are enraged!

I wonder how *we* might respond, Christ Episcopal Synagogue in Nazareth. God has come among us. Hasn't Jesus just said so? Isn't it great? We knew it. We know it. We've got it! We've got him! Right here. And in the midst of the celebration, Jesus says, well, yes, you've got it, but you can't keep it here. Look God has already moved on! Fred Craddock puts it this way: Do we really want a gracious God? Certainly we do -- for ourselves; but can we have a gracious God if we don't believe that the same grace is given to those sinners outside our church doors, outside our faith, outside our boundaries of acceptability?

God is a moving target. We wrestle with this all the time. It is the nature of our life in Christ. Our writers and poets, as well as our Gospel writers help us to put it into words. In C S Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, people are forever trying to come to terms with the great lion Aslan. One moment he has allowed them to climb on his back, and tangle their fingers in his mane, to romp and feast with him, and the next moment, he has vanished, leaving them longing and bewildered. Lucy Pevensis' observation "He's not a TAME, lion you know," is what Luke points to when he says that Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

How little we like sound of that! I suspect that each of us has chosen Jesus Christ because we have somehow encountered in Him the God who speaks tenderly to the people, and longs to bind up their wounds and set them free. How infuriating to find God moving on to others at the very moment of our encounter with God. How we long to remain in the place Love first met us. And yet, if Jesus is to be believe, and God's love is always moving towards those on the outside, can we ever remain the center of God's Attention?

Listen to our hymns, and how many of them express our longing to cling to God's local, private, care. He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me that I am his own....His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me....change and decay in all around I see, O Thou that changest not, abide with me. Hear the deep truth about our dependence and longing to make our home with God. It's the chant of the synagogue in Nazareth, be God for us, here, now, in our hometown.

But keep listening. The church keeps singing. Our body of hymns also gives voice to the Jesus who passed through the midst of them and went on his way, and who calls us to leave our hometown and follow. We sing the truth a God who is ever on the move, as well as a God who abides.

Come labor on, (who dares stand idle on the harvest plain, while all around us waves the golden grain? And to each servant does the Master say), "Go work today."... Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's' wild, restless sea, day by day his clear voice soundeth, saying Christian follow me.... Lord you give the great commission: Heal the sick and preach the word.".... Lead on O king eternal...

Even in the Bible we are presented with both an abiding God, and a God who has moved on: Hebrews presents us a Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever, while

Mark tells us: You look for Jesus, he isn't here, he is going ahead of you into Galilee. Maybe mood swings are part of the divine nature as well as human nature!

Maybe, but I think it more likely that the one who abides is the same as the one is always on the move, and in order for us to abide safe at home, we must recognize that our home is at best a mobile home. It is only by moving on ourselves that we will manage to stay in God's presence. If we are truly to claim that in him we live and move and have our being, we'd better be ready to strap on a pair of hiking boots. The people of Nazareth become enraged when confronted with this truth. Perhaps they have guessed what lies ahead of them if they chose to follow Jesus on his way: The New Testament—indeed all of Christian history—is full of stories of how Jesus' followers were imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, beaten, and even martyred. And yet, the Church, like Jesus himself, passes through their midst and continues on God's way. Perhaps that is why the Earliest Church called itself the Way.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the middle of the last century said, "The church is the only society that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are *not* its members.

Perhaps it's just as well that we are reminded of this paradox during Epiphany, this season of light. This tension between our desire for God, and God's desire for us. This is not the last story of mood swings that Luke will tell. It won't be many weeks before our liturgy will begin with "Hosanna! Hosanna!" and end with "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Such is our nature. And such is the nature of our God that even then, he will pass through death into life, and go on his way.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN