

## *Jesus is watching you*

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*Jesus* began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.'" And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; **26** and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zar'ephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Eli'sha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Na'aman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them he went away. - Luke 4:21:30

A thief broke into a home and found the safe right where he knew it would be. But as he started in on the lock, a voice in the dark said, "Jesus is watching you!" The thief froze, heart pounding. Then he saw the silhouette of parrot nearby. Again the bird said, "Jesus is watching you." Relieved, the thief answered, "You must be Jesus!" "No. I'm Moses," said the parrot. "Jesus is the pit bull ... right behind you."

Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus described as a pit bull, or anything like it. But he did overturn those tables of the greedy money changers at the Temple. And he did ruin a number of perfectly good dinner parties. This aggressive and seemingly threatening Jesus also seems to come out of nowhere in today's appointed Gospel text.

As you may have noticed, this text takes up where last week's scene left off. Jesus had gone to Nazareth, his hometown. In the synagogue on the Sabbath he read a prophetic text from Isaiah. Then he proclaimed that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy. Last Sunday's passage ends with two verses that begin today's reading, so again we hear that: "...all spoke well of him, and wondered at [his] gracious words ..." (4:22) That is what I go for in my sermons! "...All spoke well of him, and wondered at [his] gracious words ..." Why could Jesus not just let it rest? Why did such an ugly scene have to follow? Why not just go home to a nice brunch and a nap?

The text itself does not answer those questions. But apparently the pit bull in Jesus got provoked when the crowd began to ask, "Hey, isn't this Joseph's son?" To understand the significance of this remark and what follows, you'll need to return with me to Christmas Eve, and the Midnight Mass, and the Nativity gospel. You'll remember that to fulfill the emperor's census decree, Joseph and Mary "went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he [Joseph] was of the house and lineage of ... David." (Luke 2:4) And, as we all know from Bible 101, the Messiah of Israel was to arise from the 'house and lineage of ... David.' So, when the folks in the crowd in today's gospel identify Jesus as the 'son of Joseph,' they could be seen as paying him the ultimate religious compliment. They could be seen as affirming the Messianic identity that Jesus himself had just proclaimed.

Even so, something gets triggered in Jesus. Maybe he feels they are trying to get their own salvation tickets stamped based on his apparent spiritual pedigree. Their logic, as Jesus sees it,

is this: “If Joseph was a Nazarene, and if his son is the Messiah, then all of us who are Nazarenes must have divine approval.”

Jesus exposes their mistaken logic by reminding them of two times in the distant past when God’s presumed insiders were apparently ignored while salvation was shown to others, outsiders who didn’t even have a religious green card. During a famine, as many in Israel starved, the prophet Elijah performed one feeding miracle, for a lowly heathen widow. (1 Kings 17:7-24) After Elijah’s mantle passed to his protégé, Elisha, a leprosy pandemic broke out among the Israelites. You might think that any divine healing would have been rationed among God’s own people. But no ... God’s healing through Elisha came only to one man, Naaman, a Syrian. (2 Kings 5:1-19)

To get a sense of the raw nerve that Jesus touched among the Nazarenes that day: Imagine a couple of other Josephs. Imagine telling Joe Biden that God specially favors Joe Manchin; or try telling Vladimir Putin that God favors Ukrainians. Most of us can see right through distortions and abuses of self-importance when it comes to politicians. It’s harder to see such distortions and abuses in ourselves. But most of us are Nazarenes, at least on occasion, when things we believe to be sacred are threatened. And even if we think that we are following and understanding Jesus, he sometimes needs to growl to make a point with us. On that sabbath that he reminded the Nazarenes about the foreign widow and Naaman, *“they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill ... that they might throw him down headlong.”* (4:29)

As an aside – my sermons on annual meeting Sundays are often devoted to the rector’s parochial report, sometimes incorporating themes from the appointed Scriptures. But when I read that they *led him to the brow of the hill ... that they might throw him down headlong* I decided to let the annual meeting speak for itself and stick to preaching here.

So, to take one last look at the text, one remarkable feature of this gospel passage is that we are hearing the first public words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Given how it ends, this may seem a poor choice for a coming-out story. But Luke arguably wants us to be prepared, as the gospel unfolds, to hear and take to heart and respond to both voices of Jesus in this story. *Listen for, receive and give thanks for the promises of recovered sight and the setting free from what has been holding you captive.* And also: *Be prepared for the Jesus who also growls, who may unabashedly antagonize.* A friend once said, *“Propriety is one of the greatest enemies of the Gospel.”* She may have been thinking of this and other pit bull moments of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.

These two personas or voices of Jesus may initially seem contradictory or mutually exclusive. But when we allow either quality or word of Jesus to find its mark, we may find these voices to be unified by the intention of right relationships. Whether comforting or castigating, Jesus sees us where we are and for who we are. He aspires to bring or restore us into right relationship with our God, right relationship with the world God has made, right relationship by way of our citizenship in heaven and on earth, right relationship with our neighbors near and far, right relationship with ourselves.

Maybe there’s a message here after all that we can take to our annual meeting. Listen for Jesus growling as we go about our business. He may be wanting us to keep in view our faithfulness and our failures in relationships, to one another, to our neighbors, to the greater Church and to our world. When all is said and done, what else is more important?

Don’t forget: Jesus is watching you.