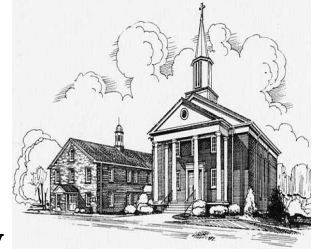


**The Lessons Appointed for Use on  
the  
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**



Year C  
RCL

Jeremiah 1:4-10  
Psalm 71:1-6  
Luke 4:21-30

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

The word of the LORD came to me saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, 'I am only a boy';  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you,  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,

says the LORD.”

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.  
See, today I appoint you over nations and over  
kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.”

**The Psalm**

Psalm 71:1-6

***In te, Domine, speravi***

- 1 In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge;  
let me never be ashamed.
- 2 In your righteousness, deliver me and set me  
free;  
incline your ear to me and save me.
- 3 Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe;  
you are my crag and my stronghold.
- 4 Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the  
wicked,  
from the clutches of the evildoer and the  
oppressor.
- 5 For you are my hope, O Lord GOD,  
my confidence since I was young.
- 6 I have been sustained by you ever since I was  
born;  
from my mother's womb you have been my  
strength;  
my praise shall be always of you.

**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will

come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

**Luke 4:21-30**

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none

of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

## SERMON

I ran across a quote by Søren Kierkegaard, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Danish philosopher and theologian this week. He said:

**People have an idea that the preacher is an actor on a stage, and they are the critics, blaming or criticizing him. What they don't know is that they are the actors on the stage; the preacher is merely the prompter standing in the wings reminding them of their lost lines.**

Let that sort of soak in. The people are the actors. The preacher is merely the prompter standing in the wings reminding the congregation of their lost lines. Of course, the downside of that is that some of the lines are dreadfully difficult, and when we are challenged instead of soothed, we tend to shoot the messenger. Surprisingly, that's the gist of the very difficult passage Luke provides us this Sunday.



Our passage comes from the fourth chapter of Luke, so we're early in Luke's account. Jesus has already begun his Galilean ministry.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When we pick up the story today, he has returned to his home town of Nazareth and is making his first appearance in the synagogue there. As far as the people of Nazareth are concerned, this is A Really Big Deal. The local son who went off and became famous has come back home to show his stuff there. Think about a local son who went off to star in the NBA and has come back home to shoot hoops with the high school team. It was like that. Everybody is wound up pretty tight because a prophet

from Nazareth would be a source of considerable pride for the community. His glory will reflect on them, and that's exactly what they wanted to hear. They are going to be disappointed.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'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 he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

WOW! Not just local boy makes good, but the fulfillment of prophecy! This just gets better and better.

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

This is where things go sideways. What the crowd wants to hear is something like

**Blessed art thou, people of Nazareth, for from your breast has sprung the one who proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor, and cursed art thou who live elsewhere.**

Jesus understood what they wanted. He told them:

“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

“I get it”, Jesus is telling them. “You see me as an entertainer. You want to see a show. You want to see favoritism for my home town. But, I am not come to entertain or to glorify you, but I am come for the salvation of the whole world.”

Things went seriously south when Jesus continued

“Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

He is telling them that there was no shortage of Israelites who needed healing in Elijah’s time and in

Elisha's time, but they were not healed. The widow at Zarephath was not an Israelite – she was from Sidon. Naaman was not an Israelite. He was a Syrian. Just think how that fell upon their ears!

**The people of Nazareth had heard Jesus' declaration of the fulfillment of God's promises as a guarantee of God's blessing on them, but Jesus affirmed a fulfillment that was not limited to Israel only – God would bless all the poor, all the captives. Neither was the fulfillment Jesus announced radically different from the work of the prophets. Israel's Scriptures themselves bear witness to God's blessing on Gentiles as well as Jews.<sup>1</sup>**

This did not go down a treat with the crowd. The crowd had convinced themselves that they were entitled to God's love, and yet the favorite son has come back to his home town to tell them they are wrong about that. Jesus had just made himself the

---

<sup>1</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible, Abingdon Press

only Louisville fan in a sea of blue, and had the nerve to say God loves Cardinals, too. They reacted just as Kierkegaard noted that people always do. They saw Jesus as an entertainer on a stage and themselves as critics, and they were having none of this kind of talk.

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

We want a entertaining preacher who will tell us soothing things, not a challenging prompter in the wings reminding us of our lost lines. The prompter labors without fanfare. The entertainer flies in private jets.

Want it or not, here are your lost lines. God's love is not an entitlement. It is a gift. God's love can

be acknowledged, but not claimed. I'd suggest that all of us know this, but that we tuck it into the back of our consciousness and when a preacher brings it up, we react with anger. The people of Nazareth believed that they were entitled to preference because of their status as God's people. God had to like them better than gentiles, so they divided the population of the world into those God loves and those God doesn't and expected Jesus to agree with them. Jesus told them stories from the prophets that demonstrated that God loves all his children, Jew and gentile. They hated that and tried to throw him off a cliff.

It is a tragedy we repeat endlessly. In the 1930's, the Nazis told themselves that God did not love Jews. In the 1940's, we decided God did not love the Japanese, and we locked them up in camps. For much of our history, we told ourselves that God

doesn't love people of color. Currently, we are telling ourselves that God doesn't love Muslims. Over and over we make the mistake of Nazareth by imagining that God loves us and hates those we fear. We want, most of all, to be soothed and entertained. We do not wish to recover our lost lines, for to do so is exquisitely painful. The "good news" of safety, popularity, and political power is more appealing, but it's not the good news Jesus preached. Not by a long shot.

Humans can either confess their shortcomings and pray God to transform them, or they can celebrate their righteousness in comparison to others. Choose carefully the path you follow.

AMEN



## BENEDICTION

Susan Howatch has one of her characters, an English peer, deliver himself of this statement.

**God and I understand each other very well. I've always been on excellent terms with Him, paying my respects at chapel every week and leading a hard-working, law-abiding life. What more can He want, I'd like to know?<sup>2</sup>**

If we want to be honest, we'll admit that something like this floats around our minds when we think on God. I know it floats around mine, anyway. Paul answered that question in his letter to his church at Corinth.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ultimate Prizes*, Susan Howatch

not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

You are not called to contrast yourself with whatever boogeyman you have contrived. You are called to relate to God's children with love.

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord lift his countenance upon you and be gracious unto you.

May the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and give you peace.

---

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

*The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.*

*The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.*

From The Lectionary Page: <http://lectionarypage.net>

