

*Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, Crawfordsville, IN
Epiphany 4C 2019
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Good morning Saints! It is a delight to be back among you. I continue to be thankful for the ministry we share. The wisdom your rector, Mother Jan, offers on the diocesan executive council—among other areas of leadership—and the ways each of you contribute to our vitality as the Episcopal Church in central and southern Indiana is not lost on me. I'm so, so grateful for you.

I continue to be excited about the work and ministry we are called to do as a diocese. You may have seen our diocesan mission articulated in the latest St. John's Spirit newsletter—we'll have more time to discuss it at coffee hour—but it is this: Grounded in God's love in Christ, the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis is called to reach out with a radical welcome and bold witness to serve and transform our world. Our priorities are to support clergy and laity as beacons of Jesus Christ for southern and central Indiana and the world, encourage a missional mindset for all our faith communities, stand with the vulnerable and marginalized working to transform systems of injustice and connect more effectively with each other and our neighborhood partners.

Our radical welcome was on display throughout the month of January when we played host to three major gatherings and conferences—Lilly Endowment, Forma and ECCC.

Our bold witness is on display every day—each of congregations, campus ministries, nonprofit entities like Craine House, Alternatives, and Damian Center are part of the bold witness to the Way of Love that we are making in this part of God's Kingdom. But I'm clear that making that witness isn't easy.

The way our world—our country—is too often divided by race, religion and class breaks my heart. The enormity of the poverty and the sense of scarcity at every income level is unsettling.

Part of what makes these times challenging for those of who follow Jesus is holding all the beauty and the pain that we encounter and remembering that both are true, that all of it is part of who we are, and that God is in the midst of all. We live in a time and in a world where witnessing to the pain and witnessing to the light and love God has for this hurting world is needed more than ever. You and I—all of us—are called to find our inner prophet and proclaim and bear witness to the pain and love in this world.

Now the thing about being prophetic is that it will cost you. There is a price to being a prophet. It is perhaps because the price often seems to high, that so many are willing to ignore the call to speak or act prophetically these days. If you have trouble with feelings of inadequacy or rejection, then being a prophet may just extract too high a price for you. And when I say prophet—I mean, someone who is willing to serve as the mouthpiece for God's words or to be the vehicle for showing forth God's love and justice. It isn't easy. So let's just admit that up front.

One of the great things about the Episcopal Church is that, in general, we have a desire to get out into the world to bring the message of God's love to our community and to invite others to join us in this incredible journey and deeply privileged work of serving our neighbors. It is central to our identity—to who we are at our core from our Baptismal Covenant-- that we tell the incredible story of God acting in the world and in our lives as we invite others into a story that is still being written.

Now that doesn't sound so threatening, or hard to do does it? When we have discovered a great restaurant, play, or know of a fun party, we have no problem inviting others to join us or at least check it out. But it is different when it comes to our church and faith life. And if we were to admit what makes it so hard, we might just come back to the problems that Jeremiah and Jesus encountered in today's readings.

We might feel like Jeremiah—inadequate to the task—“but I am only a boy!” he says. But God says, don’t worry. I will put my words in you. No excuses—you are to be my mouthpiece, now man up. I’m paraphrasing, right? And Jeremiah did find his voice and was able to fulfill his call. Didn’t make it easy, though. Didn’t make him universally loved and appreciated.

Jesus, fresh from his baptism and his time in the wilderness enters the synagogue and begins to teach there by speaking the words of the great prophet Isaiah and then adding his own commentary—today, this reading has been fulfilled in your hearing. And what could be better than hearing about the release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and the announcement of the year of the Lord’s favor? Well, if you are a prisoner, are blind, and feel like God’s light has not shined on you, then, this is great news. But if you have some power and are heavily invested in the status quo—these are fighting words.

It all seems to be going rather well until the other shoe drops. But it doesn't happen right away. The first reaction to Jesus from the crowd is pride. He's the local boy done good. Maybe they are already starting to imagine greatness for themselves by association. It's apparent from this passage that word of Jesus' remarkable feats has gotten back here and maybe they're looking for signs and wonders for themselves.

But then it starts: "Is not this Joseph's son?" And it unravels from there. Perhaps they were unable to picture Jesus as anything great because they knew him as a kid. Perhaps they were remembering the scandalous circumstances around his birth. Either way, Jesus response enflames them. He is clear that, whether they revere him or doubt him, he's not going to be doing great things for them.

This is a key point for Luke. Luke's Gospel is not directed toward Jews but toward Gentiles. This story makes one clear point -- Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of God's promise ... but that promise is no longer just for -- or even primarily for -- the people of Israel, but for the Gentiles as well.

(Jesus uses two examples of God's blessings on foreigners to make this point clear). The Jews -- even those from Jesus' own hometown -- do not "own" Jesus.

These readings challenge the church today. Prophets are rarely accepted among their own. While it seems that everyone admits to marching with Martin Luther King Jr., NOW, the truth is, he wasn't universally loved or appreciated when he was alive—whites and blacks were equally ambivalent. That, too is the price of being a prophet. El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero was hated not simply because of his commitment to liberation theology and his advocacy on behalf of the poor, but because he was seen as turning away from the upper classes, which felt the church was "their own." Yet these two prophets were living embodiments of Paul's hymn to love, and have received (perhaps with a bit of heavenly embarrassment) that world-wide honor once denied them. But they paid the ultimate price of their lives.

So there is a price to being a prophet—to speaking truth and love to power; to living as if the reign of God has already come—as if the scripture of Isaiah has indeed been fulfilled in our hearing it—to inviting others to join us in this journey. We will not always feel up to the task, we may feel that others are better at it, or are designated to do it so that we don't have to. But to that God says to us, as God spoke to Jeremiah: Do not be afraid for I am with you to deliver you.

Jesus declared boldly who he was and what he was about ... and was violently rejected for it by his hometown, his friends and family. We can just imagine how intensely painful experience this was for him. We know intellectually that rejection is a part of following Christ, and yet mostly we shy away from it because it is so painful. But as much as "pondering these things quietly in your heart" like Mary is a part of our faith, so is taking a stand like Jesus did in that synagogue and speak. Saints, we would do well to ponder two questions:

-What is something that you are called to doing or absolutely believe you are to be about, because you are trying to follow Jesus?

-Where in your life are you being called to declare love boldly, even if it means risking rejection?

Now I know there's some ball game on later today and there's lots going on in your lives. But think on these things--you might want to journal about it, or just bring it to your prayers. You don't even have to speak about it. Yet. And like Jeremiah, Jesus, Martin, Oscar and all the prophets before you I pray that you would find your voice and your strength in the God who knew you before you were formed in the womb and consecrated you before you were born. And loved you from those first moments to this very day. Amen.