

“God Calls Us To Grow” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
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An article I read once called this passage from Mark, the “un-miracle” story and described Jesus experience as being something like pressing a lit match to a pile of wet sticks. “It doesn’t matter how strong your flame is;” he wrote “what you need is something that will catch fire.” In this chapter, Jesus couldn’t do anything but a few simple cures, which was something, but nothing like what had been happening. Remember that a couple of chapters back, Jesus healed Peter’s Mother-in-law and freed someone else of demons and just last week, we heard that Jesus cured the woman who had been hemorrhaging for years and then he raised up Jairus daughter, the little girl who had already died. Up to this point in the gospel of Mark, Jesus had been off to an extremely strong start in his public ministry; he was on a roll of sorts, even gaining a small but hearty group of followers.

And then he came home. Probably eager to share all of this with the people who had raised him – wanting to offer his home people some of what people in other towns were experiencing of him. And Jesus had a special place in his heart for these people -- the lady next door who had looked after him when he was little; the shopkeepers who had watched him grow up; the neighborhood kids who had studied and played together for years; his own synagogue congregation of familiar and loving people. Like any of us Jesus probably wanted more than anything for those close to his heart to know the love and healing and power and wonder of God. But it was here at home of all places that Jesus ran into such a wall of resistance that it incapacitated him.

They initially welcomed him, apparently, inviting him to speak at synagogue on the Sabbath. They all filed in, no room in the pews that day, everyone smiling and nudging each other before he even got started, each of them taking their bit of credit for what a fine person he had become. At least until they heard what he had to say. Mark doesn’t tell us what it was, but it was strong enough to astound them at first and then to make them start asking questions, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?”

They very quickly moved beyond being astounded and took offense at him and that was that. And the whole story only took 6 verses to tell. It was Jesus first big failure, the only time in all four of the gospels that he was unable to do something, and the last time in Mark’s gospel that he ever appeared in a synagogue on the Sabbath. He’d gotten the message and he told them as he left, “Prophets are not without honor,” Jesus said, “except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And I suppose he could have rejected them right back, flinging back statements about their unbelief, but the gospel says that he Jesus was simply amazed and so he went to shine his light somewhere else.

Now all of this would be easier I suppose if it were just a commentary on those ridiculous people of Nazareth, those close-minded folk who just couldn’t quite take the leap that Jesus was asking them to take. But as is often the case with these stories, on some level anyway, they are us, the community of God’s people gathered with hopes and expectations about what we might hear

coming out of one another's mouths and hearts and lives. And while those hopes and expectations aren't bad in themselves, this story reminds us that sometimes those expectations can get in the way. They can limit our capacity for surprise and hope and change. Granted it's almost always easier if the words that are spoken and the message that is preached and the conversations that are had confirm what we already know or support what we already think or reinforce what we've always done before. Even the most open-minded among us prefer it that way especially if the way we're doing it serves us well. But when the word is more prophetic than simple confirmation or reaffirmation, when the word calls us to stretch or to grow or to change or to open up or to listen in new ways - especially if the prophetic word ushers forth from someone who was raised to know better - when prophets speak, the community squirms - it gets nervous and scared. And sometimes it even breaks. Because the light is the light, it doesn't necessarily go out, but the community for a time anyway, misses the light that is the Christ come to be God's presence among us.

Now there's a lot in this one because it has to do with church and it has to do with community and right now in our life as church it probably also has to do with the Anglican Communion, but fundamentally it has to do with prophets' place in all of those things. One of my favorite preachers says this in general about prophets and I might have shared this quote with you before but it's one that's close to my heart especially as we step into General Convention, "God is always sending us people to disturb us - to wake us up, to yank our chains, to set our hearts on fire - because about the worst thing that can happen to us, religiously speaking," she says, "is for us to hold perfectly still without changing a thing until we turn into fossils. God is not behind us, holding us back," she says, "God is ahead of us, calling us forward. God is all around us, speaking to us through the most unlikely people. Sometimes it is a mysterious stranger, but more often, I suspect, it is people so familiar to us that we simply overlook them - our own children and parents, our own friends and neighbors - all of those hometown prophets who challenge us and love us and tell us who we are."

Those hometown prophets who challenge us and love us and tell us who we are. Beautiful.

So there are two important things for us to do: we need to keep listening and if we have been given a voice and a passion for some vision we need to share it. Who's to say the next prophet to come to us isn't already here in a pew somewhere? This story reminds us to remain open to the possibility that God has something more to tell us, something more to do among us. And so, as we head into General Convention I imagine God not only behind us but also in front of us and also for that matter among us. God is forever raising up prophetic voices that will shake us up and change us and grow us and deepen us and widen us and heal us. And maybe when that becomes the faithful expectation that we carry in our hearts, maybe then the voices that shake us up become less scary and are even hopeful for us to hear.

Amen.