

SERMON FOR YEAR C, FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

LUKE 4:21-30

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SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH
JANUARY 31, 2010
"OUTSIDE"

It seems that anytime Jesus comes back home to Nazareth,
It's just about a foregone conclusion
That he will be expelled, not able to do any work there
In fulfillment of his mission,
And we will be left once again to apply the mechanics and philosophy of rejection.

I suspect we like to talk about rejection because it turns us into *outsiders* of a sort,
And we in the U.S. have conducted a long love affair with rebels –
Guys, mostly – young, good-looking guys who play by their own rules:
Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, James Dean ...
Half the cast of "The Outsiders," *all* of the cast of "West Side Story" ...
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the Marlboro Man, the Lone Ranger ...
Anyone who rode a Harley Davidson back when the image was still dangerous.

The one above the law;
The one who stands over-and-against the system;
The one who wouldn't mind throwing a torch into the place and letting it burn.

We probably owe Jesus an apology for doing this to him.
He never wanted to tear down Judaism,
And he never wanted to establish anything else in its place;
He just wanted real reform of his own religion.
He wanted to stand – well, certainly not as a full-fledged insider,
But certainly not as a full-fledged outsider.
A complete outsider is someone you don't think you have to listen to at all,
And he needed more credibility than that to walk and talk and work amongst the people.

So if we have inadvertently placed Jesus on a motorcycle or a horse
Or even put a pistol in his hand or a dashing cowboy hat on his head,
Well, that's *our* fault.
Jesus doesn't need to be saddled with this image we have for him;
He's got quite enough on his hands as it is.

What a distraction it would be to concentrate today
On the question of how he got away from the crowd.
The text doesn't tell us; we don't know.
Besides, that's a question you ask of an outsider movie character:
Did Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid make it out of the picture?

What we *do* know, however, is *how* it is
That he managed to find himself on the edge of a cliff.
That part is clear and important.

Recall that in last week's reading, Jesus has come into the synagogue at Nazareth.
He has pointed to the Isaiah text –
The captive going free! the year of the Lord's favor! sight to the blind! –
And he has said, *This is why I'm here.*

Well, they love him for it. *Here is our political messiah, come to gather us together.*

Then things get a little poisonous.

He says, *This gift I'm talking about giving: it isn't for you this time.*
You've had plenty. This is a gift for the Gentiles.

Blasphemy of blasphemies!

Have you ever thought you were going to get something you really wanted or needed,
Only to have the other party back out on the deal?
There might have been a word or two of apology in a case like that,
But not here.
In fact, there is something so deliberate about how Jesus does this –
Or at least how Luke colors the incident.
(None of the other Gospel writers treat this moment to this extent.)

Remember Lucy from the Charlie Brown comic strip,
Holding up a football, slowly finessing Charlie Brown to come and kick it ...
Only to pull it back at the last second, after hopes had been built up,
Charlie Brown flying in the air, landing on his back, his hopes dashed yet again.

Jesus holds the football.
The people of his hometown feel that they've been cruelly tricked,
And they run him out of town, preparing him for death at the hands of a mob –
A stoning death, the most popular kind for people who speak heresy.

Why he does this, I cannot tell you; I do not know.
I have run to this text a hundred times this week looking for the answer,
And always the answer was pulled away upon approach, like a football.

This much, however, is clear and clearly important:
The Gospel – the redeeming love of God manifest in this Jesus – is for everyone.
God does not place limitations on who is and who is not to receive it.
And if that's true, then we really are the same in God's eyes.
And if that's true, then in God's time there will be no outsider, no insider.
Just "Us," the people of God.

I pray we hear the voice of God speaking this morning.
This is a radical inclusiveness – whether you stand inside this church or outside it.
Grace is for all, grace is for each, no matter your status.

May it be so. Amen.