Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Jesus passed through the midst of them and went away” (Luke 4:30).

Fourth Sunday of the Year

Jer 1:4-5, 17-19; Ps 71; 1 Cor 12:31—13:13; Luke 4:21-30

Jesus' reputation had gone before him when he arrived home in Nazareth. It was the talk of the town, how one of their own had been preaching and healing in the lakeside city of Capernaum. It was also a total surprise. Jesus, the carpenter's son, was just another simple tradesman, friendly enough but never a standout, and certainly not a brilliant preacher and miracle worker. Even his relatives were astonished at the stories circulating of unclean spirits in the synagogue shrieking that he was God's chosen one, or of the scores of people cured of every kind of disease at his touch.

It was not lost on Nazareth that Jesus was putting them on the map. He was called "Jesus *of Nazareth*," a tiny backwater mocked for its insignificance. "What good can come from Nazareth?" was heard even in Jerusalem. But now, Jesus would make them famous, a magnet for pilgrimages, a shrine for cures and spectacle. Locals were already lining up sick relative so Jesus could heal them.

Suspense rose when Jesus and his companions arrived in the muted atmosphere of the Sabbath, but the synagogue was jammed with newly devout worshippers at the service. The rabbi reserved seats in front for some visiting scribes from Jerusalem, and the scrolls were ready when he invited Jesus to step to the lectern to read. The crowd leaned in to hear every word, but their thoughts were of signs and wonders.

But Jesus stunned them by claiming he was the messianic figure Isaiah foretold who would declare a year of favor. Jesus' mission was universal, larger than selling prayer cloths and potions. He will not be held captive to promote a local shrine, and he gives two examples to support the proverb that prophets are not accepted in their own native places.

The hometown reaction was disappointment turning to insult at Jesus' audacious claim for himself and his failure to perform. His inaugural was also his declaration of independence from any expectations except the mission he has been anointed for, to bring good news to the poor. He quickly went from honored guest to *persona non grata*, and the crowd ran him out of town.

Not a propitious launch but a foreshadowing of Jesus' gradual descent into the role of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. He did not come to convene an enclave of the

righteous, the chosen or the perfect. He came to gather the margins, the neglected and excluded, sinners and outcasts. Outrage after insult will crescendo in Jerusalem, where he will be vilified, excommunicated, handed over to the Romans and crucified outside the city as a criminal.

On this Fourth Sunday of the Year, months from Easter, we are shown the Paschal Mystery, the great paradox of glory through suffering that awaits every disciple. Religion’s success is its demise if all it promises is a feelgood path to heaven. Jesus made this clear from the outset, alienating well wishers and arousing critics, who, long before his disciples, figured out just how dangerous he was to the status quo.

Prophets are not accepted in their native place, or anywhere else if they are still alive and challenging the home front, where hard questions and actual dilemmas impinge upon our lives. To follow him is a decision we make over and over once we know just where he is leading us.

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