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4 Epiphany, Year C
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From Wonder to Rage

This has probably happened to many of us at one time or another. We are in a crowded place: we look out and across the room someone waves in our direction. We can't precisely make out who it might be but because they are waving so eagerly we instinctively wave back. This goes on until we look over our shoulder and discover that we are not the one being waved to, but it is in fact, someone near us. What we thought was just for us was meant for someone else.

How does that make us feel? Probably slightly embarrassed. One goes from feeling recognized and singled out to feeling overlooked and a bit foolish. All in the matters of seconds.

Jesus discovered something similar when he returned to Nazareth. We heard the first part of this encounter in last week's gospel. When the people went from amazement to rage as it began to dawn on them they alone were not going to be shown the attention they thought would be directed towards them. Any insider advantage for Jesus' miracles was not to be. It became clear that his agenda was much wider than their own parochial interests.

Today's gospel invites us to look at the power of return, rejection and rage.

Returning home is not really in the cards for me, and I would venture to say, for some of us gathered. The places I grew up no longer has family members or neighbors to put me up for the night. The suburban streets I walked as young boy, the lawns I would mow for a price, my customers for my afternoon paper route are most probably not around to say: "there is that Pendleton kid – all grown up. Look what he's up to now." "And a priest to boot – never saw that one coming!" We live in different times: more transient, mobile and often disconnected and far away from our beginnings and roots – making it harder to be welcomed back and measured by those who knew us when we were young. Think about the place you would call home: imagine the welcome you might receive?

Not so with Jesus. He may have spent most of his adult life in around Nazareth, but he's been away for some time. And now he's returned. And the people say, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

Last week I spoke about the clear purpose of Jesus' mission – to bring good news, set free, to proclaim release and recovery. His timeframe for this holy work would not be delayed. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

God makes a similar claim of urgency on the young Jeremiah's ministry. V.10: 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." Jeremiah's challenging mission to preach judgement to a people whose faith had become unrecognizable – he was charged with warning them of the disaster to come.

There is power and urgency in responding and acting upon life's challenges -- not tomorrow, but now. Not regretting what we failed to do yesterday, but doing something about it today.

A much-quoted proverb captures this: “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present.” (attributed to Alice Morse Earle) Mother Teresa puts it another way: “Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin.”

Jesus’ return home -- at first -- went well. He stood up to read in the synagogue like any other men and boys who could read. He seemed to know what the hometown folks were looking for from him that day, didn’t he? -- miracles and signs of his power -- for that was the buzz in the air. He cut them off: “And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” Jesus could have given the people what they were asking for and then carry on.

Telling people what they want to hear, instead of the hard truth, is a risk for all us – from the small things to the significant. In relationships. At work. Preachers can find an easier to, as the expression goes: to “comfort the afflicted, rather than afflict the comfortable” with the hard demands of the Kingdom of God. We have tamed the words of Jesus in many ways, not wanting to upset people all the time lest they head for the exits and stop coming. To be sure; not making waves can lead to a smoother sail through life. It can also mean that we don’t travel very far or go too deep.

Jesus’ hard truth to his people was to remind them of the actions of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. When they had a chance to respond to the people -- to provide food during a famine and heal lepers who were suffering, both of them reached beyond Israel and brought relief to foreigners to make a point. Jesus, Elijah and Elisha shattered the perimeters of those for whom the message of hope and freedom was intended. It was to be felt and heard far beyond those who first heard it. The work of God cannot be limited to tribe, nation, class or even family.

With this, Jesus quickly loses his hometown support. The people turn on him and reject him. Luke 4:28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. V. 29 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. So much for returning home.

I can see why the people might have been disappointed – no miracle or sign for them. No comp tickets to the show, no backstage passes or upgrades to first class. But what led them to filled with such rage to the point that they were ready to throw one of their own off a cliff?

I can’t say I’ve ever experienced true rage, though I know I’ve been known anger. Rage is far beyond getting mad.

We saw rage on display in Charlottesville in August, 2017 as white nationalists marched through the quaint college town with torches and chanting venom and hatred. A 20-year old man was so consumed with hatred and rage that he used his car as a weapon and plowed into the crowd of counter-protesters and peace marchers that caused the death of Heather Heyer and injured scores of others. It was a profane lethal form of road rage that shocked the nation and reminded us of the horrors that were thought were put to bed in the ashes of World War II with the defeat of Nazi Germany.

I don’t know enough psychology to know fully what triggers that level anger and rage. Is it a deep insecurity wrapped in fear and then projected out onto others? I know Anger Management classes

is a growing business, where people are mandated to attend to learn ways to “walk away” or “count to 10” before acting on their emotions.

What is the source behind so much of the anger and rage in our world today? Suicide bombers, hate crimes, cyber bullying. Some blame the anonymity of social media where one can express disdain or hate remotely and out of public view. Some point to the polarization of politics and the ways that many fall back into tribal alliances when they see all that they have known changing before them.

I wonder if anger can turn to rage when we realize we are about to lose what we always had thought of as our own. Our place. Our right. Our belief. Our privilege. Our version of the truth.

One ritual remedy is to confess our sins when we gather. The power of sin – left alone and unchallenged – can fester and grow in the lives of individuals and communities and potentially lead us further into darkness and away from the light. Confession is good for the soul – calling us out for limitations of being human and opening us up to a better way.

This Epiphany season began when wise men from the East – who were not of the faith or tribe of Jesus – searched for him. God opens and never closes. Expands and never narrows. Invites and never turns away. This is disturbing and wonderful news that can take a lifetime to accept let alone share with others.

A funny thing happens on our return home to the peoples and people who knew us when we were young – even if we take the journey in our imaginations. We can see ourselves as we are today. Now.

The psalm 71 reminds us how we can lean on God, who has known us when God took us from our mother’s womb.

As we know the sun will rise, each day is a chance to begin again. Today is a gift called the present. To learn from failure, heal from rejection, turn away from what leads us astray, and do something and be someone that makes a difference.