Jeremiah 4:1-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4: 21-30

Last week’s Gospel told how Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth. He went to synagogue on the Sabbath and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, (he read) because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Today we heard the follow-up story. All in the synagogue spoke well of this native son. They had heard of his great miracles and were glad that he was home. Can’t you imagine them rubbing their hands together in delightful anticipation of the good things Jesus was going to do for them? However, what Jesus said to them next, turned their acceptance and excitement into anger and rejection. First, Jesus scolded the crowd for their desire for signs. Then he reminded them of two well-known stories, in which a widow and a leper were miraculously cared for by God through the actions of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Neither the widow nor the leper were Jews, nor did they live in Israel. They were outsiders, foreigners, aliens. The synagogue congregation in Nazareth knew instantly what Jesus was getting at. They couldn’t count on their genealogy as Jews nor their familiarity with Jesus to ensure that they would receive God’s blessings. No wonder they were filled with rage. Their sense of entitlement was challenged. And they realized that their expectations were not going to be met.

So, when was the last time you heard something in church – in a sermon or a reading, in a prayer or a hymn – that so outraged you that you wanted to kill the messenger…or at least it made you shake your head or roll your eyes? Why is it that so many of us Christians today are seemingly never disturbed or upset during worship – except, of course, when the acolyte goes the wrong way, or a prayer is changed, or this sermon runs too long? Why aren't we upset by God's word like the folks in Nazareth were? Could it be that scripture has lost its power to move us? Could it be that we have heard these words so often that we no longer really “hear” them? Could it be that we are paying too much attention to the tweets and texts and emails…not to mention the Super Bowl hype? Jesus proclaimed his message not based on popular reaction – nor on his polling numbers – nor on the number of his Facebook friends – but on the eternal truth that is God’s word. I made you. I love you. I am always with you.

Let me ask you again…What is your response to the Good News that Jesus is proclaiming? Is it amazement or fury? Acceptance or rejection? Growth or stagnation? If you are anything like me, the answer is a bit of both. Being human, our response to the Good News is often two steps forward and one step back. We want, we desire, we pray to become better disciples, but we don’t always succeed. We know we have Jesus as a role model. We have all those who have gone before us in faith as our mentors. And we have each other for support, encouragement, and comfort.

And yet sometimes we become too focused on ourselves - on our own wishes and desires, rather than on what God is calling us to do.

In this season after Epiphany, let us respond to Jesus’ call to be ever more faithful disciples,

who bring good news to the poor, both the financially poor and the emotionally poor; who proclaim release to the captives, those held in slavery by drugs, alcohol, as well as those in prison; recovery of sight to the blind, those who cannot see physically and those who cannot see morally; freedom for the oppressed, those oppressed economically, socially, governmentally. Let us be open to being both amazed and infuriated by God’s Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, who continues to challenge the status quo while upholding all that is of God.

Now I want to share with you the remarks I had prepared for the Annual Meeting, but chose not to deliver because of the positive, extended conversation you had with Rev. Laura. Some of you continue to mourn the closure of the Day School. Some of you continue to mourn Fr. Marshall’s departure. Some of you mourn the recent loss of parishioners. Mourning is a natural part of life, to lament over what used to be, to grieve over those whom we love but see no more. But is it also a natural part of life, that when the pain of mourning diminishes, the search for new meaning begins.

The more fully that you start to dream about the future, the healthier and more vital you will become as a parish.

In the same vein, I encourage you to let go of the hurts and the sorrows and the regrets of the past. You cannot change what has happened, no matter how hard you try. Dredging up negative experiences from the past only weighs you down, deadens your enthusiasm, saps your energy…. and how long do you want to live like that? Your challenge today is to live in the present moment, to plan for the future with eyes wide open, and to give thanks to God in all things.

I especially want to encourage you to reflect on all the happiness, joy, and blessings that have been part of your life here at St. John’s. Who were the people that made you want to be here? Give thanks to God for them. What events touched you deeply and told you that this is where you should be? Give thanks to God for that. What do you do here that gives you a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction? Give thanks to God for that. In all things, let us give thanks to our God who blesses us beyond our wildest imaginings. And let us share those blessings with all that we meet.

There are some significant challenges that you as a parish face in 2019, beyond calling a priest. They are vision, finances and congregational growth. **Vision**…When someone asks you if you go to church, how do you respond? Do you talk with excitement about the people and ministries of St. John’s? Is there some common, shared language that you all would recognize as being core to describing St. John’s? Is there a common vision that goes to the heart of what it means to be part of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Chula Vista? Having a common vision and a language to describe it will be significant for your health and vitality as a parish. We can work on this together over the coming months.

**Finances**…While the budget for 2019 is balanced, thanks to the rental income from Head Start, there is little room to absorb unforeseen expenses. Increasing the profit from fund raisers is one strategy to address this. Wouldn’t it be exciting if every parishioner brought one additional individual to each fund raiser this year? That could potentially double your revenue expectations.

Such a strategy might also increase church membership. For instance, bring a friend or relative or neighbor who has never been to St. John’s before, to the Shrove Tuesday Pancake dinner. Let them experience who you are in this place and then share with them why you are eating pancakes and sausage on a Tuesday evening. And you could bring someone who has never been here before to the St. Patrick’s Day fund raiser. Share a bit of your faith story with them. Tell them how this congregation gives you life. Also, help them to understand why this particular Celtic saint is relevant to your life today. Then, invite them to join you for worship some Sunday morning.

**Congregational growth** is directly tied to building relationships. Develop deeper relationships with the folks in the neighborhood, the folks you socialize with, the hungry that you feed, the needy that you buy blankets for, the Head Start families. Developing relationships is one way in which this parish can grow.

As we look ahead to the coming year, there will be challenges along the way that we don’t even see at this moment. There will be successes. There will also be mis-steps and miscues and perhaps even some failures. But Jesus has told us that he will be with us always, to guide and strengthen and love us. And Jesus taught us that the Holy Spirit will empower us to do good things…using each of our unique gifts for the good of others. Do you believe this? Are you ready to act on this? Then let’s get to work right now and make a difference in the life of this congregation, and in the life of this neighborhood, and in the life of this city. That is what Jesus would have us do.