

Who IS This Guy?

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Dale L. Bishop

Text: Luke 4: 14-30

When I was a student in Heidelberg College in Tiffin, Ohio, which is one of over 20 colleges and universities that trace their origins to our denomination's commitment to education, the Administration Building was more or less the center of campus life, even more than the building we actually called the Campus Center. The U-Building, as we called it, was where we got our mail, where our grades were posted, where we met for our required chapel services on Tuesday mornings, where there were classrooms, and where the local fraternities and sororities, which carried the quaint and entirely fictional designation of "literary societies" had their halls, or meeting rooms. The most distinctive architectural feature of the building, other than its bell tower, was its central well. From the second or third floor, people would look down over the railings and keep track of the comings and goings of their fellow students and their professors on the main floor.

There came a day when one of my fellow students, an odd sort of fellow, stood on the railing of the second floor, and, after he made sure that the way was clear, jumped. He was, I remember, wearing big heavy boots, and when he landed safely on the main floor he barely had to take a step. It was like one of those perfect landings in a gymnastic competition. It wasn't just his jump that made him seem a bit strange to the rest of us. He was pretty much a loner. He didn't distinguish himself in athletics or academics, didn't belong to any of those "literary societies,"

didn't seem to be attached to any particular circle of friends. In fact, the only things I really remember about him were his unusual attire—he dressed like an Eskimo—and that death defying leap he took from the second floor of the U-Building.

About twenty years after our graduation from college, I was perusing the Heidelberg Alumni magazine, and there was this guy's name. He had become one of the country's leading authorities on the recently discovered and terrifying epidemic called HIV/AIDS. He was heading some Presidential blue-ribbon commission. I could imagine a whole host of my college contemporaries reading that article and saying, "Peter? Isn't he the guy who jumped into the Well from the second floor?"

"Isn't that Joseph's son?" the people of Nazareth said to one another after Jesus had made his rabbinic debut at the town synagogue. He had done what usually happened during the Sabbath worship. He had been invited to read from the scripture of the day, the Jewish version of what we call the lectionary. Usually, the first reading was from a section from the Torah, or first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and then there was a reading from "the Prophets," which functioned as a kind of commentary on the Torah. We don't know what the Torah reading for that day was, but we can guess. Judging from the section from Isaiah that Jesus read, it may well have been from the book of Leviticus, where there is a description of the Jubilee, a world-changing event that was supposed to occur every fifty years. At the Jubilee, liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land, and debts were to be forgiven. At the Jubilee people could return to property that had been sold or confiscated. The year of the Jubilee was what Isaiah was referring to when he talked of "the year of God's favor." It was the year when people could start over.

Remember that this message, this lectionary reminder read by Jesus that day in Nazareth, was delivered to a people under occupation, a people whose properties had been confiscated by the Romans or their local collaborators. It was heard by people who knew friends or relatives who were in prison because they couldn't pay the taxes, or because they resisted Roman occupation. And here was Joseph's son reading those prophetic promises: Joseph's son, that odd fellow who had gone off to be with the followers of John the Baptist, and then spent some time in the wilderness, on his own, starving himself and contending with the wild beasts; Joseph's son, the guy who had drawn the notice of others in Galilee, but who was now among the people who knew him, who had known him since he was a little boy. It was Joseph's son who was reading from Isaiah, and then, most surprisingly, it was Joseph's son who sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

No wonder people spoke approvingly of Joseph's son. Maybe he was the one who was going to fulfill those Jubilee promises that had, until now, been so many words in a book, so many pipe dreams that had failed to come to fruition. Perhaps this Joseph's son was the real deal.

But then, on second thought, they considered not only what Jesus had read, but also what he had not read. Jesus had read the part from Isaiah about bringing good news to the oppressed; he had read the part about bringing liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. He had said those magic words about this being the acceptable year of the Lord, the time when God would intervene in history and turn things around. But then, just when things were getting good, he had stopped--mid-verse. He had stopped just before the really good part. He had stopped before Isaiah's promise of the day of God's vengeance, when the scores would be settled between oppressed and oppressor. What? No vengeance? You mean the Romans and their lackeys are going to get away with it?

This is the season of Epiphany, which literally means "shining through," or "revelation." It's a season when we learn about Jesus. The season of Epiphany begins with the appearance of the Wise Men in Bethlehem, and from that familiar story we learned that

Jesus came not just to the expected recipients of the good news, the Jews who awaited the arrival of a Messiah, but to foreigners from the East who had the audacity and foresight to travel a great distance and to bring him gifts. Through Luke's account of Jesus' baptism at the Jordan, we learned that Jesus' ministry began with a blessing and with the presence of the Holy Spirit in bodily form, in the form of a dove, and with the voice from heaven, "This is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased." And last Sunday, as we considered what John the Evangelist called the first of Jesus' signs, we reflected on how Jesus can transform emptiness to fullness of spirit, the thin water of our lives into the rich wine of a life filled with God.

And this Sunday, we learn why people like us killed Jesus. Barbara Brown Taylor has written about attending a retreat where people broke into small groups to discuss the question of the day, which was, "Who is the person who has most represented Christ in your lives?" One woman said, "I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it that told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'"

That's really what happened in Nazareth on that fateful day. Jesus had told the truth about the nature of God and God's promises—no vengeance, no retaliation. And then he had gone on to talk about two Old Testament figures who had received God's grace, but were members of groups that were despised, or feared. There was the Gentile widow whom Elijah had saved from starvation and whose son Elijah had revived from death. She suffered from the disabilities of being a Gentile, a woman and a widow. And there was the Assyrian King Naaman, a man doubly cursed because he was both a Gentile and a leper, who was healed through the intervention of Elisha. God's love is available and lavished upon all, even upon people whom society has rejected, even upon people who themselves doubt God's love and grace, even upon those who are considered enemies. No vengeance, and a God who lavishes grace on *those people?*

The people who wanted to throw Jesus, their neighbor Joseph's son, off the cliff weren't the people who often seem to assume the role of villain in our gospel accounts. They weren't the Roman authorities who, like Pilate, considered Jesus to be a rabble-rouser

and a threat to the public order. They weren't the morally impaired Herod, who imprisoned and killed John the Baptist and had designs on Jesus' life as well. They weren't religious leaders threatened by Jesus' critique of their hypocrisy and their abuse of the poor. No, the first people who tried to kill Jesus were people like us, good church-going people who came to the synagogue curious, and expecting to be pleased by this young preacher. They were people who brought their custom-made grievances and blood hatreds, and expected Jesus to ratify and bless them. The first people who tried to kill Jesus were, at the end, the same ones who shouted "Hosanna" as he entered Jerusalem, but later in the week, after they discovered that he wasn't what they wanted him to be, called upon Pilate to crucify him.

I remember a visit to the Galilee, to a town not far from Nazareth, to meet with Father Elias Chacour, a Palestinian Greek Catholic priest. I was part of a delegation from the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ, and we were on what we called, regrettably, a "fact-finding mission". When we met with Father Chacour, we informed him that we were from churches that sought justice the Holy Land. He smiled, and then asked, "Only justice? Everybody here, Israelis and Palestinians alike, will tell you that they want justice and will present some pretty compelling arguments that they have justice on their side. We need something more fundamental, and much more difficult. We need love."

The first people who tried to kill Jesus were people who wanted Jesus to confirm their righteousness and to bless the justice of their cause. They were people who wanted Jesus to fit into their cultural expectations; they wanted him to shape his message according to their prejudices. They wanted him to tell them what they wanted to hear. They were people who didn't mind politics in the sermon as long as the politics coincided with theirs. Jesus, alas, confronted their bland generalities and petty hatreds with an honesty and with a love that made them want to kill him.

The mystery of Epiphany is that the more we learn about Jesus, the more we learn about ourselves. When we see ourselves in the light that Jesus sheds on us, we see both our

glory and our shame. But the Good News comes in the ultimate epiphany, which is the cross. The Good News is that when Jesus, on the cross, looked in sadness on those who not only wanted to kill him, but actually made it happen, his words were words of love and forgiveness. "Father, forgive them."

In God's forgiveness, we are given a new life, we are promised our personal Jubilee, our personal chance to start over again, and again. Thanks be to God. Amen.