

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 30, 2022; Year C  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

*Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30; Psalm 71:1-6*

There are times of the year when early memories are much closer to the surface than usual. This last week in January is always that way for me. My father was born on January 31, 1925. He died on January 24 and was buried on his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday in 1977. But then on January 31, 1988, I gave birth to my first son and Dad's first grandson, named not for my dad, but for his own father and great-grandfather. So I suppose that it is not a surprise that I am thinking a lot of my family this week—and of small sons and fathers and the relationship between fathers and sons.

My mother used to read a book to my younger brother and me: *The Big Honey Hunt*, by Stan and Jan Berenstain. I was a little old for the book by the time it made its way into our house, but I wasn't too old to sit with Mom when she was reading aloud. This was the first in the dozens and dozens of Berenstain Bear books that have been published since 1962, a funny rhyming tale about a small bear and his hapless Dad on the search for some honey. I realize now that the book must have bored my mom out of her mind, because she used to read it and intentionally drop in some random spoonerisms—so that the title became the Hig Hunny Bunt, and Small Bear became Ball Smare. And I can remember my little brother's peal of laughter to this day.

Well, as I say. It's January, and I seem to be dwelling in memory lane. The Berenstain Bears did not stop with hunting honey, as I bet most of you know. Between Stan and Jan, both now departed, and their sons Leo and Mike, the Berenstains have written more than 300 titles, dozens of which ended up on the shelves of three little Strouds in the 1980s and 90s. Many of their books are parents' helpers. That is, they are stories to help kids get used to hard or scary things such as going to the doctor or welcoming a new baby or going to kindergarten or doing your homework on time. The Berenstain Bears rely on a formula: there's a problem or a worry. A parent tries to make it better. The problem gets a little worse. The small bear does their best. In the end, everything is okay.

And I hope you won't think me irreverent when I say that today's Gospel lesson makes me think of writing my own small book, although I might leave out the bears and just talk about Jesus. I would call today's book *Jesus and how to be the church*.

Today's gospel lesson is actually the second part of a story. Last week, we had the beginning of the story, when Jesus went home to Nazareth, and attended worship in his home synagogue. He is the local boy made good, and so he is invited to read the lesson for the day. And he stands up and walks up to the platform. And with great care, he unrolls the scroll, and then he finds the lesson for the day, and he clears his throat, and reads very carefully from the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, 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."*

And then he rolls up the scroll and hands it to the attendant and goes and sits down again. And we are struck by the care and devotion that Jesus shows when he reads Holy Scripture.

And it is not unlike what we do here. We have lessons appointed for the day. And we have readers scheduled to read them. We send the lessons out in advance, so that the readers may practice them. And we have a special book with large print, and we put it on a special stand. And we have a light that brightens the page. And when the reader is done, she announces that she has just read The Word of the Lord. And we all acknowledge it: Thanks be to God.

And the worship of God and study of God's word is an important part of how we are the church. But of course, there is more. Today we get the second half of the story. Jesus has read the lesson from Holy Scripture. And now, he is preaching about it. And what he teaches makes the people furious. Because he points out to them that the promise of holy Scripture is **not** about the individual comfort of each person in the room. There have been lots of starving widows in the history of our people, but scripture only speaks about saving one of them. There have been lots of lepers in our history, but scripture only speaks of the healing of one.

The message of Jesus is not about individual health or prosperity. The message of Jesus is about the commonwealth—the health of the community working and living together. And what does the community need? Well, the Berenstain Bears will tell you that the community needs kids to go to the doctor and the dentist and to school. The community needs us to learn to play on teams and do our chores.

And really, those little formulaic books about Small Bear and his family have their basis in the stories that we call 'holy scripture.' Jesus teaches us how to be the people of God—not just when we are at worship. The church works in the world all week long. Jesus teaches us to seek out the least and the lost. To look for the folks on the edges of society. To reach out to those who have less, to see that their needs are met. There are lots of starving widows and lots of lepers who need healing. And Jesus lets us know that almost none of them will get supernatural miracles. But any one of them can get care from you or me.

It was not the kind of sermon that anyone wanted that day. Maybe each one was wandering down their own memory lane. Maybe each one was weary with the roughness and difficulty of their present lives. They wanted personal comfort and individual vindication and familial prosperity, and they were hoping to find it by following all the rules. And so, on Saturday morning, they were in the synagogue, because that is what you do on Saturday mornings.

Jesus though. Jesus was not much into self-help. And he did not care much for personal comfort. He looked for the health and wholeness and the good of all of God's people. It made the congregation so angry that they chased Jesus out of the synagogue and almost off a cliff. But then, the most remarkable thing happened: he turned into the crowd of them and walked through the midst of them—and on ahead of them.

My sisters and brothers and siblings, we are called to follow Jesus. And this week, he is calling me out of memory lane! But it is infinitely more scary than the first day of kindergarten. We are called to follow Jesus, so does that mean that we should be ready to be thrown off a cliff? *But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.* Our Gospel portion for today ends on that verse, and in the next two verses, Jesus walks on to Capernaum and starts teaching there. And his authority is accepted.

We have such high expectations of ourselves and such low expectations of God. We expect that our behavior will earn us a relationship with God when God is right here with us all along. What Jesus did in that synagogue in Nazareth was not what the people expected. They were looking for individual salvation—but what Jesus offered was how to be the church—how to make the Kingdom of God come true right here and right now.

But then, everything that Jesus did was unexpected. He ate dinner with outcasts. There's another little book: *Jesus and the dinner guest.* He walked through violence and healed the sick with a touch. There's another book: *Jesus touches the sick.* He forgave sinners, as though he had the authority from God to do so. *Jesus and the mercy of God.* He broke bread and shared wine. *Jesus and the presence of God.* He went to death on the Cross. *Jesus and the end of sorrow.*

Jesus teaches us that our care for all of God's people strengthens all of our relationships. All our relationships—not just those of small boys and their fathers. This is not always easy. The love of God is not expected. It is not earned. It doesn't make sense. It simply is. God loves because God is love. And God calls us to live into unexpected loving. That is what it means to follow Jesus.

What did Jesus do? When it seemed like they were going to throw him off a cliff, he turned and walked through the midst of them. That is, he turned to face them – and if they wanted to, they were welcome to follow. And by the way, nobody fell off the cliff that day – but all up and down the coast, lives were changed.

How about this for the title of the Church's story? *Follow Jesus and change the world.*