

# Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

February 3, 2019

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus painfully discovered some people didn't dig his act. His rejection and murder at the hands of his own hometown friends and relatives foreshadows crucifixion to come. When God puts his fate into the grubby hands of ordinary mortals, he gets into trouble in a hurry

So, Jesus read the scroll of Isaiah, and naturally claimed the prophecies of the messiah for himself. At first, his hometown folks responded, "Isn't he a *nice* boy? Aren't we all so proud of him, why the messiah of Israel and all? *Everybody* knew he was special."

They're ready to open the Messiah's Childhood Home Museum and Gift Shop.

Jesus knew his mission would be compromised by sentiments like these. He faces people who want to capture him for their own purposes and control him by patronizing him. Jesus, however, was not about the past, but the future – God's future. If he caters to voices that cling to the past, God's future will never come, the world will not be redeemed by his cross and blood, and so he refuses, telling them, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town."

That's it in a nutshell. The conservative peasants of Jesus' hometown, just like the Chief Priests and Pharisees in God's hometown of Jerusalem, want God to conform to their personal agenda. The only future they want is the continuation the death grip they have on the past.

When God refuses to conform to expectation, people's reaction is ferocious. We should be shocked into disbelief as we read this story and discover that Jesus' own people actually wanted to murder him – tried to throw him off Nazareth's notorious high cliff – because of his refusal to conform. What could account for such a reaction?

It tells me that the maps of reality that take root inside people's heads are serious business. Cognitive neuroscience tells us that there may be "reality" out there in the world, but all we *know* is the map of reality inside our own heads. That map is life itself to us, because without it we would be paralyzed by sensory overload. There's just too much confusion out there in the world so our brains organize it for us before it ever gets presented for our conscious consideration. We really don't like people or things or ideas that mess with our mental maps.

One familiar example of a very fixed map is the Munich Syndrome. That's where British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, struggling not to repeat the misjudgments that led to World War I, capitulated to the Hitler and gave away Czechoslovakia. It may have been 1938, but the map in Chamberlain's head was still World War I in 1914 which, most people believed, in retrospect, maybe could have been avoided by giving the Kaiser just a bit more of what he wanted. And whenever you hear the word "appease" in a political conversation since then, you know you're talking to somebody whose head is still mapped to 1938 where every adversary looks as bad as Hitler and we'll never repeat *that* mistake again.

We live by the same kind of maps in our personal lives. How often are we governed by the statement, "I'll never be make that mistake again!" or "[*Such and so*] has always worked before and it will again," or "What else did you expect out of old [*so and so*], who's never going to change." Maps tell us about our spouses, families and friends – what to expect from them, how to handle them, which pigeonholes they fit into in our lives, and all that before they even open their mouths on any given day. We even have a map of God – what to expect from God, what we think we have to do to keep God happy. All God needs to do is follow the main routes on the maps we draw for him. Maps make the world manageable and give us power.

So compelling are our maps that we get squirmy when they're even described as maps at all. We prefer to call them "reality," and we stone the prophets who, like Jesus, tell us they're not reality at all. No way, we shout! Our maps are our lives and we'll fight to keep them.

So, here's the hard message of today's gospel in Nazareth. When Jesus comes to create God's future, he will come at the expense of the map in our heads because God's future is a lot bigger than what our past has prepared for us. God's future will not be limited by our past. If we are faithful to God, our maps will have to go.

What is God's alternative to maps? We catch a glimpse in the call of Jeremiah, a prophet who will see and speak of God's future, and fully give his life to God. In commissioning his new prophet, God boiled down Jeremiah's deep knowledge of God's future into very simple words, given in one simple, thunderously powerful sentence: "Before you were formed in the womb," God says, "I knew you." Before you were anybody at all, God says, *I knew you*.

So God knows who we *really* are, not how we've been shaped and mapped by our experience. And who is it that we really are the way God knows us? What are we apart from the sum total of our experience from birth until the present? Our soul. That's who we are apart from our history. We are souls, and we know our souls not through direct experience, but through faith.

The basis for living God's future, therefore, must be faith, and not the things we think we've always known. Faith in a God we cannot see. Faith in a true self, a soul, we have never directly seen or experienced. Faith that the God we cannot see knows the soul we can't fully discern. The two of them link up out there, off the edge of all the maps of reality our brains have generated for us.

It sounds confusing, and so it seemed to another pilgrim at the beginning of his epic trek to true self and to God. "Midway in our life's journey," Dante Alighieri writes, "I went astray...and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood." So begins the *Inferno*.

The poet, facing what we would today call a mid-life crisis, strays away from the lighted, familiar map of the world and wanders into deep darkness where there are no maps and nothing makes sense. He is face to face with chaos, lacking any way to see God's future or his own. It feels like death to him...it feels like Hell, for, indeed, it is.

He journeys downward through nine trackless circles of Hell. Along the way he meets everyone who was anyone – cardinals, kings, princes, bishops, warlords. He gets a good hard look at all the failed maps of life. He sees exactly how people managed to get it wrong in life and exactly where and why each one's particular failure landed them

their particular place in Hell.

Then, at the very bottom of the pit, he scoots covertly past Satan himself and begins a long upward climb through Purgatory. This is the Catholic land of painful redemption where all the inadequate (but not fatally flawed) maps are peeled away.

Then, he moves on to Heaven where souls are finally free to turn from all maps and see God face to face. This is the place where Dante knows God as God knows Dante in his soul's true identity. This is the state of attention from God that Jeremiah describes with the words, "before you were formed in the womb, I knew you."

The journey of Dante is one well known to addicts in recovery, committed artists, and serious spiritual seekers. It is the "dark night of the soul" described by St. John of the Cross.

It is a journey known to any of us when fear of disaster or death takes over our minds and we fall off the far edge of our maps. The journey begins when our maps fail us, as they do for an addict bottoming out, or like that moment in *All in the Family* when Gloria rolled over in bed one morning, looked at her husband Michael, and saw him as a total stranger. It's like the moment poor Neville Chamberlain must have experienced when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and he realized his map for avoiding world war had been wrong, wrong, wrong.

The question God's future asks is what will we do when we have no map? We could do as the non-recovered addict does and get another fix. We could do as the Chief Priests and Pharisees and get a bigger hammer to nail the messenger we don't like right to the cross. We can go deeper into denial and pretend everything is OK when in our heart we know it isn't. We can be broken as a human being, living half a life, never able to smile again with a full heart.

Or we can stay the course with Dante and Jeremiah, take a deep breath, and let the chaos rage as it will. We can register the inadequacy of our maps. We can let them be peeled away as we turn to faith and trust ourselves fully to God. We can say soul-deep prayers with the voice of our hearts. We can call on God who lives off the edge of maps in the places labeled "Terra Incognita," and "Heere be Monsters."

Our journey is steadiness, followed by honesty, followed by faith, a journey that leads to the place where, in the words of Paul, we will know as we are known.

"Before you were formed in the womb, I knew you," Jeremiah's God says. That's your real past. It's beyond memory, off the early edge of the map of your life, as it will be off the edge of the map at the back end of your existence. Both are places where you were nothing but a soul in the hands of your God, and there will be moments, now and again, within life, where your experience of God and your soul is exactly the same.

So, trust your maps for your practical day to day navigating. But do not trust them for the meaning of life itself, or for the answers when life demands more of you than you're prepared to face.

When those big moments in life come, be steady and honest and full of faith in what you cannot see or remember, and follow God with your soul into the unimaginable future they hold for you.

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