

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**O**pen a bible to Mark 6.1-6, Sunday's gospel. Place a lighted candle beside it.

**LEADER:** As we celebrate July 4th, let us name values and qualities we hope people of other nations see in us.

*Take time to name these.*

**LEADER:** Loving God, we come to hear your word as both Christians and citizens.

**ALL:** May we persist in seeking for the global human family what we want for our own families.

**LEADER:** Our constitution identifies us as the good people of the United States.

**ALL:** May our just deeds testify to our commitment to the common good.

**LEADER:** Jesus, an empire put you to death, but you teach us to build your kin\*dom through our everyday love for one another.

**ALL:** May we fight fear and terrorism by widening our circles of love and understanding.

**LEADER:** Let no one face tragic loss or economic ruin alone.

**ALL:** Let us listen to their stories and share our love and means.

**LEADER:** Giver of Life, may we recognize when we, or our leaders, confuse our own voices with yours.

**ALL:** May your word set our hearts in order and open our ears. Amen.

# SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

**S**urprisingly, Jesus can work no miracles is his hometown, Nazareth. Jesus' homefolks can't get beyond their certainty that they know who he is.

His preaching astounds some, but the majority can't accept him as a wise and prophetic teacher. He is a tradesman who can terrace your hillside or build a wall.

This is a story of rejection, of dismissing the gifts of a homegrown prophet. This is our story, too, every time we refuse to change or doom new possibilities to fail.

Once I joined our hired man Layton for a beer. I hadn't seen him in a long time. He talked about visiting with my sisters and brother that week, how he enjoyed them. Then he came to me. "And you," he said, "you're all right, too, even if you are educated." We mattered too much to each other for me to

resent his bias or for him to resent my education. But too often differences lead to festering resentments and demonizing those who aren't us.

**A** doctor commented about certainty in our small Christian community. "Certainty can kill a patient," he says. "I teach medical students to stay curious, look further, keep probing for diagnosis and cure. It's so easy to miss clues."

"The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty," theologian Bernard Lonergan writes. Doubt implies questioning, challenging, actively engaging a person or a thought. But certainty dismisses the need for further search and for living with questions.

● **What is valuable about doubt and dangerous about certainty in your experience?**



# GOSPEL

## Jesus preaches in Nazareth.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded.

**PEOPLE:** Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary and

the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon—and aren't his sisters here with us as well?

**NARRATOR:** They took offense at him.

**JESUS:** Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.



**NARRATOR:** Jesus could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. He was amazed at their unbelief.

Mark 6.1-6

## His neighbors reject Jesus.

Preaching is what Jesus comes into Galilee to do. His theme is simple and direct. “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1.14-15). He spreads the good news of God’s love from village to village very publicly, often in synagogues, often on the Sabbath as he does in Sunday’s gospel.

When Jesus preaches in his hometown Nazareth, his former neighbors experience his astonishing wisdom. But they question in disbelief and perhaps jealousy where a carpenter can have learned such wisdom.

The Church reads gospels about Jesus’ early public ministry on the Sundays between Epiphany and Lent. In these gospels Jesus preaches, heals, and gathers disciples. His fame spreads despite his telling people he heals to tell no one. He makes Capernaum his home base.

By chapter two Jesus is already in conflict with other religious teachers. When he forgives a paralyzed man’s sins, local teachers label his words blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins, they insist (2.1-12). Then Jesus demonstrates his authority to forgive sins by commanding the man to arise and walk.

When local teachers challenge his eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus offers this wisdom: “I came not to call the righteous but sinners” (2.17). When they criticize his disciples for picking handfuls of grain on Sabbath, Jesus insists, “The Sabbath is made for people, not people for the Sabbath (2.27).

Even Jesus’ family challenges his emerging ministry as a prophetic preacher and healer. They fear for his safety and sanity and “go out to seize him because people are saying, ‘he is out of his mind’” (Mark 3.21).

Now in the summer the Church returns to proclaiming gospels from Jesus’ early teaching and healing in Galilee. He speaks in parables, for example, comparing the word of God to sowing seed. Like seed, the word of God yields according to the kind of soil on which it falls. Jesus calms a storm and the fears of his disciples. He raises up a child near death. These are far from everyday actions. The gospel wants us to ask: Who can this man be?

- What have you taken away for your life from hearing Mark’s gospel so far this year?
- In what ways do you experience God is near in your everyday life?

In Nazareth Jesus faces a community of disbelief. He can neither heal people of sickness or free them of destructive demons

that drive and possess them. His hearers are like the well-worn paths on which no seed can grow (Mark 4.14). What blocks the people's hearing is certainty and cynicism, which quickly tame their amazement.

The Nazarenes are hearers of Israel's scriptures, sufferers under Roman rule and taxes, people yearning for the promised messiah. Yet they are certain Jesus is a carpenter and no prophet, no messiah. His prophetic words cannot take root in their hearts.

The gospels of Ordinary Time invite us to take stock of our everyday relationships. We can reverse attitudes that keep us in boxes of certainty. We can recognize what we do to ourselves when we use our creativity to express hate rather than recognize God present in one of our own—a neighbor, brother, sisters, friend.

The holy happens in our lives when we reach out with kindness and interest to those different from us. God is near in how we see and listen, how we share and include.

● **What has more power in how you live every day—fear of all you don't know or certainty you know all you need to know?**

● **What phrases do you use to invite conversation with a newcomer?**

Sunday's gospel invites us regular churchgoers to see ourselves among the synagogue worshipers in Nazareth and to consider what we are too certain about to rethink.

Jesus invites controversy by speaking his message in public. His words open a door to faith and friendship but demand wrestling with who he is.

Debate and dissent can seem unpatriotic to political leaders and heretical and divisive to church leaders. In Nazareth, certainty leaves no room to believe in Jesus, the possibility of God among us.

● **What scares you about controversy and debate?**

● **What questions have called you to transformation?**

Where does authority lie in the hackable world of internet, Facebook, and Twitter? What is true, false, enhanced? What are we willing to believe about people we don't know or cultures we have never experienced? Why do so many people share memes that express strangers' extremes and stereotypes. Why don't we think for ourselves?

What authority do the gospels have today after 2,000 years of work to interpret and live Jesus' message? Why aren't we better at loving our enemies or forgiving as we want to be forgiven?

The hometown congregation of my teen years included whole families of gifted musicians. Our priest loved involving the whole



parish in liturgy. A decade before Vatican II we were all about "active participation of the faithful."

We celebrated the Easter Vigil before the rest of the Church. Dad worried we would burn the old wood church down as we lit the fire of creation on the wooden front steps and then the Easter candle to light our way into Church.

When I took money to Father in the sacristy for comic books we also sold after Mass, I discovered that the ornate wedding-cake altar was a hollow catch-all storage place, holy from the front and useful from the rear. When the parish men made a wooden table that faced us, the change made clear what we already lived: we are the body of Christ gathered at his table to worship.

● **Why have so many Catholics and other Christians become non-affiliated?**

● **When have you resisted change to your certainties?**

● **What in the gospels makes sense to you in today's world?**



## Ezekiel prophesies from exile.

The prophet Ezekiel was taken into exile with the first wave of Israelites that the Babylonians took captive in 598 BC. Ezekiel experiences God outside the boundaries of Israel in a refugee camp on the banks of the River Chebar, where the Babylonians interred him.

In this foreign land the prophet sees a bright cloud flashing fire and in its midst four living creatures that look like humans with hands, feet, and faces. One face is human, the other faces are an ox, lion, and eagles.

These faces have become symbols of the four gospel writers. These four living creatures have wings, they dart about like lightning. Beside each living creature is a wheel that moves them in any direction whenever the spirit moves them. Above the creatures is a dome and the throne of God. In this splendor Ezekiel experiences the likeness of God's glory and receives the call that from Sunday's first reading.

God directs him to preach to the exiles. Whether the people hear or reject Ezekiel, they will know a prophet has spoken for God among them, even in this distant land.

For Ezekiel life in the refugee camp is like walking in a field of dry bones, but in his prophetic visions he imagines God's spirit reconnecting the bones and bringing a faithful people to life again. God does not abandon the people.

Mark's gospel sees John the Baptist and Jesus continuing the long line of faithful prophets who speak for God in Israel's history. The measure of true prophecy is never its popularity or success. Ezekiel is to speak whether people listen or not.

who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. Their descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them."

Ezekiel 2.2-5

- Where do you experience God alive and with us today? What imagery conveys this experience?
- Whose prophetic voice inspires your hope for our human family? Who do you refuse to hear?

## God calls Ezekiel.

The voice said to me:

"O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you."

When the voice spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard the Holy One speaking to me.

The Holy One said to me, "Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels

## PRAY

**LEADER:** God, who inspires the prophets, help us to listen for your word in our lives.

**ALL:** Teach us to discern the truth even when it is spoken by people very different from ourselves.

*Voice your own petitions.*

**LEADER:** Jesus, by your grace give us strength in the midst of our weakness.

**ALL:** Let us give you honor in our worship and in the living of our lives. Amen.



## DO SOMETHING



- Visit Future Church to discover the change this organization supports, encourages, and teaches. [Futurechurch.org](http://Futurechurch.org).
- Write to friends and family you haven't seen since before the pandemic. Catch them up with how you are surviving.