

# JESUS PICKS A FIGHT

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 31, 2010, at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on The Gospel according to Luke, 4: 21 – 30.

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*When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

— Luke 4: 28 – 30

Jesus picks a fight. “Did you notice,” he says to that congregation in Nazareth, “that when there was a famine in Israel, Elijah fed no one but a widow in Zarephath? Isn’t it interesting that there were all kinds of people in Israel who suffered from leprosy when Elisha went outside Israel to heal Naaman a Syrian?” His words are tactless and offensive. The people he’s talking to had gotten it straight from the horse’s mouth that they were God’s darlings. It isn’t just a nerve here that Jesus touches; he takes the central nervous system of Israel in his hands. And he does it deliberately.

The fight he picks involves God’s covenant people. God loves Israel more than any other people, Zion more than any other place, David more than any other king, Moses more than any other prophet save John who is the least in the kingdom of heaven. The New Testament never reneges on God’s scandalous preferentiality, and insists right up to the end that Jesus is King of the Jews or he is nobody at all. This contest takes place in an arena as every contest does, this one not in Rome or Athens but in Zion. When the Lord attacks the powers of darkness he does so within the boundaries of the land of rest which is the land of struggle.

It was for this battle that God preferred Israel; just so, the Most High combats Israel’s sin and rebellion in a way that he does not combat the sin and rebellion of other nations willy-nilly. Being chosen brings both

privilege and danger: into the vortex of that danger the Beloved Son moves when he goes straightway into the wilderness strapping his chin for a fight with the powers of darkness, with the seed of the serpent. What he dishes out in the synagogue is nothing he won’t take. Before he’s through he will take all of it alone.

What the second Adam does is what the first Adam was supposed to do: he contends with the adversary. The story of Moses and the prophets is the story of God concentrating sin and uncleanness, funneling it through the holy nation, so that it could rest on the Messiah who would bear it away.

That it is Israel’s calling to bear the weight of God’s battle against sin is evident from the context of Abraham’s call in Genesis 12. Yahweh will no longer flood the earth; the nations have been scattered and God will no longer deal with them directly; instead he will pursue his holy war against sin within the house of Abraham. And coming out of that upcountry village — Can anything good come out of Nazareth? — the destiny of that house would be decided in the land once and for all. It would rest on the shoulders of the champion who passed through the midst of the congregation and went on his way.

Amen.

\*A homilette is a category of preaching I tag by length JFF (just for fun). The categories: a sermon [1250 words]; a sermonette [1000]; a homily [750 words]; a homilette [500]; a jaft (just a few thoughts) [250]; and a jot (just one thought)[100].