**3 Epiphany 2025**

 Today’s gospel from Luke tells the story of Jesus’ first sermon, and

he created quite a stir. As a preacher, like Jesus, from time to time, I

can ruffle a few feathers. Step on a few toes. Make waves. It’s an

occupational hazard.

 But it’s not about me or any preacher; it’s about God’s word. It’s the

nature of proclamation: God’s Word is a word of grace but also of

judgment. It comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. The

Word of God is not simply food for thought, something to think about,

mull over, consider for what it’s worth. God’s Word is confrontational.

It calls us to account for the way we live out our faith. It invites us to

surrender our wills to God’s Will and honor him as the sovereign Lord

of our lives.

 “Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee…He came to

Nazareth, where he had been brought up. He entered, as was his

custom, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day.” (4:14,16)

 Where else to begin your ministry except in your home church, the

place where your faith has been nurtured and developed, the setting

that’s most comfortable and familiar? You’d think that if you could

count on anyone for a sympathetic and supportive hearing, it’d be

among your own family and friends. Yet, Jesus found, as is often the

case, the people of your home church can be the most critical, the most

suspicious, the hardest to convince.

 I left the Church when I was 15 and came back around almost 15

years later to seek the blessing on my home congregation. Trust me,

some were shocked, surprised and a bit dubious. Grace prevailed and

they didn’t kick me out! One older woman who knew me from

childhood asked me how I was doing. Doing well, I said. She got up in

my face and, rather sternly said, ‘You should be, I’ve been praying for

you! Of course, I thanked her. I was on my best behavior, because I was

trying to get into seminary.

 Jesus wasn’t interested in seminary. He didn’t aspire to become a

priest. He was a lay preacher and teacher. By the way, laypersons in the

Episcopal Church can get preaching licenses, if they feel called to

preach. At any rate, the elders of the synagogue move with

breathtaking speed from praising their hometown boy to wanting to

throw him off a cliff!

 By reminding them about the widow of Zarephath and the cleansing

of Naaman the leper, Jesus essentially tells them that Gentiles will have

just as much access to the grace of God as they do, and that the poor

and disenfranchised, not church people, take first place in the God’s

Kingdom. He had insulted them and rejected their assumptions of

status and privilege. It reminds me the church of my childhood was

more like a club to which people paid dues. There were lots of people,

but not much deep spirituality. I’d rather have a smaller group of

people who have a deeper hunger for the things of the Spirit.

 I’ve served in churches where many of the folks were just playing

 church. I challenged them and paid for it. I’m pleased to say that I don’t

experience that here. We are small but mighty in our worship,

fellowship, and outreach. However, we need to be careful going

forward that we don’t become too comfortable and complacent. As I’ve

said before, this congregation can grow, but it’s going to take

intentional prayer, hard work, and the willingness to step out of the

box. This is why you called me.

 Beginning today at our Vestry meeting after coffee hour, we will

place Evangelism and Growth as a standing agenda item for each

meeting. During the next three years, we’ll learn, we’ll step out, we’ll

fail, and we’ll regroup and follow the Spirit that was upon Jesus, and is

upon us through Baptism. In the end, we will be transformed and will

grow in surprising and delightful ways.

 And remember, as I said earlier, clergy don’t have a corner on

preaching in the Episcopal Church. If you find the Spirit nudging you

preach, please let me know and we’ll put the wheels in motion. And I

promise we won’t throw you off a cliff!

**May it be so.**