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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning's gospel contains two stories about rejection. That's a sad note on which to start a sermon, isn't it? I promise that this will end on a hopeful note, so bear with me through this rather difficult beginning. This encounter could not have been easy for Jesus, and so it is not easy for us. Jesus, after all, is the character in the Bible that we as Christians most identify with. We are sympathetic to *his* suffering, and we are sympathetic to the suffering of those whom Jesus loves. We can identify with the disciples as followers of Jesus, and we can identify with the sick, the lame and the poor because we all have experienced some form of suffering ourselves.

But I wonder, can we also identify with the people of Nazareth who reject Jesus? For the sake of really understanding this story, let's try. They are a lot like us in some ways, like us as a church family. Like them, we come together on a fairly regular basis for worship together. We see the children get baptized and watch them grow up. Some of us mentor and teach these children. Then we see them get confirmed and all too soon after that we see them celebrate their graduation from high school. Like them, we think we know these kids that we see growing up. At least, we think we know their characters. And then suddenly, we don't see them anymore for a while. Years later, do we still presume that we know them? Do we say, Oh yeah, that's Frank's boy. I remember when he was growing up at church. Good kid. We say 'good kid' because we have frozen Frank's boy in our memory of him. In many cases, we have no idea what he's done since we last saw him whether good or bad.

We know that the people of Nazareth knew Jesus while he was growing up in Nazareth. They had a memory of him from seeing him around town over all those years. We also know that Jesus left Nazareth. We know that he was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist at a place that was not close to Nazareth but close to Jerusalem. Given the distance and the gospel storyline, Jesus had been away from Nazareth for a while. Then suddenly he appeared in town. Maybe he was welcomed with hugs and handshakes when people first saw him. But then he opened his mouth and began to teach them in the synagogue. His ability to relate the scripture to their lives was astounding, profoundly wise. This Jesus that they heard did not match the Jesus that they had known all his life; or that they knew all his life. Their immediate response was to rely on their first impression of him; the impression they held collectively. If they ALL were leery of him, their doubt and mistrust was validated, right?

Jesus' own response to their rejection of him was measured. In responding, he called upon the Jewish tradition that he knew so well. That Jewish tradition included the teaching of the prophets, one of whom we read about this morning in our Old Testament reading. That reading came from Ezekiel who was a prophet from the 7th century BC. Like Jesus, Ezekiel was called by God to speak on God's behalf to the people of Israel. And by Jewish tradition in the scriptures, Ezekiel had been warned that people would be loathe to hear what God had to say. Here is the scripture that contributed to Jesus' response to being rejected by his own neighbors and family: "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." And then he prepares his disciples to go out and possibly face rejection, too. It seems this

rebellious house, that is the people they encounter, might be forever skeptical of a prophet's message; might forever doubt that God could be acting in small, seemingly insignificant events by way of face to face encounters; especially encounters with familiar people.

But God does participate in our world that way. I'm fairly confident that most of you can say that you have experienced God's participation in your life. And I'm fairly confident that God's participation in your life did not come in the form of a lightning bolt, or an earthquake or by way of a booming voice from the heavens. No. God's participation most often shows up in the small things we do for one another; in hospitality, in generosity, in acts of financial or emotional support or simply in the act of kindness such as being present and a companion in someone else's grief.

So when I see that people are getting terribly anxious about the state of world affairs; when I see people acting out in ways that exacerbate our division rather than enhance our common humanity I grieve. I grieve because the world as we know it does not know our shared story. Most people in the world recognize the significance of the Judeo-Christian Bible. Whether they study it, or admire it, or just simply know that it exists, the Bible is book that is recognized globally. In that book, we find a collection of stories that together form a narrative that defines a pathway for living a fulfilled life.

In this society, one can choose a variety of lenses through which to view the world. We have the freedom to do that and I for one am grateful for those who established this nation on the concept of individual freedom, and I'm grateful for all those who have fought to preserve it. Some people choose to view life through a philosophical lens, some an ideological lens, some an economic lens and some, like

me, choose a theological lens. All of our views of life and the world are grounded in some underlying story that provides the underlying myths that guide our personal morality. When our buttons get pushed, when we begin to operate outside our normal comfort zones, we fall back on these myths to guide our behavior. When we see events like what happened in Charlottesville last summer surrounding the monuments there, or like what happened in the restaurant recently in Lexington, we see people's buttons being pushed and we see them responding in ways that others would say are not like them. It is in these actions, and these re-actions, that underlying principles are revealed.

I think it is fair to say that at this point in time there is wide disparity in the myths and stories that undergird the responses of our nation's people. We have become a more and more secular population. Europe is even more largely secular than we are. But somewhere in the recesses of the European and American psyches is a recollection of the myths of our common heritage. Maybe it would be a good thing if we dusted off our Bibles and sat down with them again. Maybe we could together learn to understand the stories in ways that make sense to us today. It's possible for us as a society to do that. We are doing that here in our adult formation classes. We teach the stories to the children according to their developmental level. We know these children are getting to know these stories, the stories that will help shape the arcs of their lives.

But we have a problem. The world draws the children away from the church. When they are old enough to make the choice to continue to attend church or to do something else on Sunday, well, let's just say travel sports or something else wins out.

The church at large grieves about this. And I'm afraid our larger society is paying a price, too. We need to be better at knowing our common story, we need to be better at having faith in our common story. We need to be better at recognizing the voice of Jesus and deeply listening to what he has to say. I believe that together we can avoid being like the people in Nazareth who rejected Jesus that day. I believe that we here at St. John's are providing the opportunities to know our common story more deeply so that when Christ comes into our lives we don't end up rejecting him and sending him on his way. And I pray that when our buttons get pushed, when our emotions are stretched beyond their normal capacities, that our responses will be guided by what we have learned and know from Jesus.