

“Jesus and the Hometown Folk”

Luke 4:14-21

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Luke begins his story of the ministry of Jesus first with Jesus’ baptism when the heavens opened and a dove descended and a voice said, “This is my beloved, listen to him.” Then filled with the Holy Spirit Jesus was driven into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and then was tempted by the devil. At the end of the time of temptation angels came and ministered to him.

Jesus then began teaching and preaching throughout the Galilee and everyone praised him and said good things about him. As he is making the circuit of Galilean towns I guess it was inevitable that he would appear in Nazareth, where he had been brought up. Jesus is coming home. Don’t you imagine that Mary was out there in the crowd to greet him on that Thursday or Friday when he showed up? She was cooking him and whoever was traveling with him his favorite dish.

When Friday evening rolls around he goes to synagogue “as was his custom,” Luke writes. And those in charge asked him to read—his chosen text was from the prophet Isaiah. These familiar words, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives....” would have been known to all of them. It would be as familiar as our scripture this morning about Jesus going home or the story of the Good Samaritan or the story of the Prodigal Son. These people in Nazareth knew their Hebrew texts—they probably were punching one and another and saying, “Listen, he is reading one of our favorite ones.” And they were reminding each other, “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” They were proud, one of their own reading so well. Jesus, yes young Jesus, Joseph and Mary’s boy, home from school for mid-winter break. It’s good to have him back home. We have heard of his recent accomplishments.

Do you wish you could have been there that Sabbath in Nazareth? Sure, we know this story pretty well of Jesus going home, but wouldn’t it have been good to have been there as eyewitnesses? Then we could have seen Jesus firsthand, instead of hearing this story secondhand. Haven’t you thought to yourself from time to time, “Oh, if I could only have been there—seen a miracle or two for myself; swept away the expanse of years/centuries and stood there as an eyewitness to Jesus?”

We presume that believing would be easier if we were there. If we could have seen Jesus, then believing would be a cinch. This terrible gap of time was what the German philosopher, Lessing, described as “the ugly wide ditch.” Here we are in our time, and there, two thousand years away, is Jesus. “How can an event, once significant in this time, be significant for all time?” asked Lessing. Belief would be easier if, just for a moment, we could climb aboard our time machine.

Yet, if mere time were the problem, why did the folks in Nazareth not see? Why didn’t they know him? Maybe they didn’t know him because they knew him.

Jesus, hometown boy, Joe and Mary's son, addressed Israel from its own scripture; its own past; its own authoritative texts; the familiar prophets; a text they already knew. "The Day of the Lord is here!" he announced. "Amen!" they shouted. There was an exciting stir among the chosen people of the Lord at Nazareth. "Amen!" All of our waiting for deliverance is over at last. The Lord is coming! At last he is coming to redeem his own!

People were lifted up on their crutches, old men wept for joy, women rejoiced, the oppressed raised their faces fill with hopeful expectation. "Amen!"

And then Jesus gave the scroll back to the Synagogue attendant and they rolled it up and put it away. All eyes were on Jesus for the interpretation of what he had just read. They were waiting for what new insights he would bring or at least some old insights to remind them again of their God. Then Luke says, "Jesus began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" Luke seems to imply that they didn't get it at first, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." You might explain it away by saying there were just amazed that one of their own had something to say at all.

But Jesus didn't stop by saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He went on and say, "Doubtless, you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"

He then reminded them, "When the Lord came earlier, there were lots of poor hungry women in Israel, but God chose to help a foreign widow in Zarephath instead. (1 Kings 17) You know that story," says Jesus. There was silence. "And speaking of old, familiar stories," continues Jesus, "you all remember the one about how Elisha healed an army officer, a Syrian—rather than all those poor deserving lepers in Israel." The congregation was silent. Jesus goes on, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

I was at the Downtown Clergy Luncheon a few months ago and one of the pastors was bragging about a visiting preacher he had at his church. "You should hear him," he said, "his style, his illustrations, his power. He is wonderful." One of the others spoke up and said, "You should hear me three hundred miles from home. I'm down right brilliant."

Luke wants it well understood. The problem with Jesus is not between the new and the old, between the known and the unknown, but between the people of God and their own memory. Between the known and the known.

When the Lord came to deliver us, Jesus said, "remember that he came to human need beyond the bounds of the chosen. It's in our Hebrew text," Jesus said. "You know the stories of Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha and a chorus of "Amens" becomes a thunder of silence. It is the silence of judgment, when an exciting sermon suddenly becomes recognized as an old story, we already know, and wish to God we could forget.

The church which like the synagogue before us also stands judged by our own familiar stories and should listen carefully. Proximity to and familiarity with the person, texts and ideas of

religion is a privilege that also blinds, dulls, impedes. Isn't that the carpenter's son? We know him.

"Yes," Jesus continues, "pagan Ninevah will get to judge this place because Ninevah repented when Jonah preached to them. The Queen of Sheba went across the world to hear Solomon, and yet, here among you is one greater than either Jonah or Solomon." At the judgment you will claim your privilege as free passes, recalling the evening you had dinner with Jesus or when he preached in your town, but to no avail. Judgment begins with God's own house.

The people of Nazareth who first greeted Jesus with "Amen!" finally yelled, "kill him!" because he painfully reminded them of what they knew, namely that God is free, alive, gracious beyond the bounds of our willingness to know. The worshippers at Nazareth knew that God had blessed an undeserving outsider through Elijah's ministry, and they knew that God had cured a Syrian terrorist through Elisha. But it was a lot more than they wanted to know, and they certainly did not come to church this January morning to be reminded that God refused before to play by the rules and might well refuse to play by the rules again.

What to do? Stone this young prophet! They failed in Nazareth of course but not many miles and months later, after a few more Jesus-sermons, they succeed. Like Elijah, the prophet, Jesus was a troubler of Israel's ignorance. But it was not the kind of ignorance to be relieved by a trip to the local library.

"I wish I knew the Bible better," she said. Well, I say that it is possible to know the Bible too well. Having scripture, knowing it, owning it, may be the most dangerous kind of knowledge.

"Luke 4—about Jesus going after those poor, blind, conservative Jews in his hometown—yes, I already know that story." It seems that nobody is safe from Jesus—even his hometown neighbors.

The preacher and the rabbi had a good relationship. The church and the synagogue were right next door to each other. The rabbi and the preacher would drink coffee together on Monday morning and compare weekend notes. The church folk parked in their lot on Sundays and they parked in the church lot on Fridays—it was a good relationship.

Well, you can imagine their excitement when word leaked out late one spring day that Jesus was returning to earth and that he was going to come to our hometown. Well, they began sprucing up the outside of the church, the old shrubbery that needed to be removed was taken away from in front of the church. Yes, and they painted the fellowship hall, just like they should have the year before. The choir worked extra hard on the anthem—with rented trumpets and tympani even.

On the appointed day, they all gathered at church. You couldn't get a parking place after 10:30. The place was packed—people they hadn't laid eyes on in years! The choir entered. Eleven o'clock came. No Jesus. Eleven fifteen. No clouds descending. They sang "Just as I Am" one more time. Twelve noon. No one. About twelve thirty, the kids got restless and had to be taken out. Then one by one, others left, dejected, disappointed. They gathered in the newly decorated fellowship hall, had lunch and went home. The Day of the Lord hadn't come.

The next morning the pastor was in his office, having coffee with the Rabbi. "Say," said the rabbi, "met a friend of yours this weekend."

"Really, who was it?"

"This young rabbi, Jesus."

"Really?"

"Sure, he was over at our place on Friday evening; nice boy, good to see him."

"Your place? But we, but we were waiting for him over here on Sunday."

"Oh," said the rabbi, "Well I suggested he ought to walk over here and meet you since he was in town, but when I told him you wouldn't be here till Sunday, that you didn't know Hebrew, he said he might be uncomfortable."

"For those who have ears, let them hear."