

Jesus Comes Home to Nazareth

- 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
- January 27, 2019
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Jesus of Nazareth, now in his early thirties, having gone as was his custom every Sabbath since he was a boy to the synagogue in his home village, returns home for the first time. The Spirit has come upon him in John's baptism of him in the Jordan and the Spirit has strengthened him in the desert for his mission. He comes back to the synagogue he knows so well and where he was so well known. He had come here as a child each Sabbath before his parents had brought him to the temple at the age of twelve for the equivalent of his Jewish Bar Mitzvah. It was here he had gathered with the men in what was no more than a simple meeting room used as a synagogue because the village was small and poor, just prosperous enough to have the precious, sacred scrolls of the Torah and the prophets. It was here where he had heard and had read after his coming of age the Hebrew texts, listened to their interpretation, and pondered his own identity and call. It was here where he had taken what was written on the scrolls of these sacred texts to heart and learned them—as people of that culture were so able to do—by heart. When Jesus now comes here to this synagogue he comes not just to his hometown, but the home of his faith, the home of his heart, the home of his God. Rumors have recently been going around the surrounding area of Galilee that he is now acting as a prophet.

On this first Sabbath of his return the leaders of the synagogue are curious about him so they invite him to read in the synagogue service, handing him, perhaps with intention, the scroll of a prophet, the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls the scroll, careful not to touch the handwritten letters on the scroll because they bear the name of God and are not to be touched. He finds the passage he is looking for and reads it aloud with clarity and meaning and devotion.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

It reads like poetry, the poetry of God's working to give joy, to bring light, to free, to initiate peace—in short, the breaking in of the reigning of God among the people, the kingdom of the God Jesus has come to believe in and to seek in this very meeting room where he stands. He carefully rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and sits back down on the floor. All eyes are on him, intently looking on their fellow villager, rumored now to be a prophet. Jesus holds his fellow villagers in silence for a moment as they await his interpretation of the text. He gives what must be the shortest homily ever given, one sentence: "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

What does he mean? Does he mean: “Look at me: I am the fulfillment of what Isaiah prophesied would come about”? Or does he mean: “Look at God: God who is now bringing about in your very day the kingdom God promised”? It could be either, couldn't it? But isn't it far more likely that Jesus is pointing not to himself but is pointing to God, to what God is doing: “Open your eyes, the kingdom of God is at hand!”? As the Evangelist Mark states at the same point in his work; “Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.” Jesus, far more likely, is not pointing to himself, preaching himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah, but pointing to and preaching God and God's kingdom now being fulfilled in the people themselves if they will but open their eyes to the new thing that God is doing among them in accordance with his promise. We read the gospels far more truly if we always read them as Jesus being a transparency to God, to his Father, than as a mirror on himself.

This was Jesus' first chance to come, empowered by the Spirit, to his own villagers in his home synagogue. One message, one sentence about the wondrous breaking in of God. This was also Jesus' last chance to come into that home village synagogue because, finding among them a lack of faith and hence unable to do among them the wonders he did elsewhere in the rival villages of Galilee, they drove him to the brow of the hill on which Nazareth sat and tried to hurl him down headlong if he had not slipped through their midst. They were looking to him to be their hometown hero, the champion of their clan, their boast against the clans of the other villages. Instead, he pointed to God, not to himself, and they missed the point, or perhaps I should say the pointing, because they looked intently on him rather than expectantly on God to whom he pointed. We too should look to the one to whom Jesus points and who he wants us to know is in our midst bringing about the kingdom.

I couldn't help but think, in reflecting on this gospel, what I would say if I returned to my home church in Juneau, Alaska, the smallest proto-cathedral in the world, where I was brought up, served Mass, was well known as a boy, and pondered my own identity and vocation. What if I now come back and gave a one-sentence homily there by citing one verse of the bible? What if you did that in what was your home church as a child; what would you say? I think I would say to my townsfolk what Jesus said to Nathaniel, “You shall see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Yes, heavenly traffic on Jesus as the Son of Man, one of us in our flesh, both then in Nazareth and now in Seattle. But it is the angels of God ascending and descending upon Jesus like a ladder in order for the love and mercy of God to come to us and our response of faith and service to go to God in him. Jesus is our way to God, and God's way to us, always pointing to and a transparency to God rather than a mirror on himself. I wonder what my Juneau parishioners would think if this 75 year old came back to where I was ten and spoke of how I have experienced Jesus as a ladder to God. I wonder what you would say to your parishioners of your hometown in your one-sentence scriptural citation, and how what you said would be understood and received. How might what we would say now and who we have become now be a pointing to, a transparency, to God known as loving and merciful in Jesus of Nazareth?