

January 26th, 2025

Luke 4:14-20 “When You Come Back Home”

A few weeks ago, when we worshipped with First Baptist, I mentioned how important it is to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit as it relates to our baptism. We were in Luke’s gospel, and I talked about how the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Then after that Luke writes, “Then Jesus, *filled with the power of the Spirit*, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.” Then I said, “Well, not so much by his hometown synagogue, but that’s another sermon for another day.” Well, today is the day. Today we get to see what happens when a preacher goes back to their hometown to visit their church, or in this case their synagogue.

I don’t really have a home church. I went to a Lutheran kindergarten, but I didn’t worship there. Later, in grade school, when I briefly attended Olivet Baptist Church with a friend, I really wasn’t around long enough to establish any “roots.” I didn’t start “going to church” until my Junior Year of High School, and even then, I was shopping around because I was so new to the Christian Faith. You all are the longest church I’ve ever been a member of. But I’m the exception, not the rule. Most clergy in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were raised since childhood in a Disciples congregation. We call them “Cradle Disciples.” When I served as an associate regional minister in Virginia, I got to see firsthand how difficult it is for some of these cradle Disciples ministers to go back to their hometown congregations. “They don’t listen to me!” is the biggest complaint. Most say something like, “They still see me as the trouble-making preacher’s kid who ran around the sanctuary and got sassy with the Sunday School teachers.” Even folks in the church admit that it’s hard to be led by someone who has such a history in the church. They’ll say, “We just know too much about them.” True, but the other side of that is, “the preacher knows too much about the congregation.” There may have been a little of that going on in this week’s scripture.

Maybe the folks in Jesus' hometown synagogue thought they knew too much about him, but he definitely knew too much about them.

With a little imagination, I think we can get a clearer picture of what's going on here. Jesus had been away from Nazareth for quite a while. Many scholars believe that Jesus was educated in a community of Jewish mystics called "the Essenes." We mentioned them a few weeks ago when we talked about John the Baptist. They were outside of mainstream Judaism because they weren't in cahoots with the corrupt religious leaders. Physically speaking, they deliberately kept themselves away from the seats of religious and governmental power because they concluded that what Judaism had become, especially during the Roman occupation, barely resembled what the Torah (the Law of Moses) taught. An early church historian named Josephus wrote that the Essenes were committed to a life of piety. They had no personal property or money. They lived communally and were quite strict in their observance of the Sabbath. As I mentioned two weeks ago, the Essenes ritually immersed themselves in water every morning. They ate together after prayer, devoted themselves to charity and benevolence, forbade the expression of anger, studied the Torah and other religious writings.

The Essenes we know the most about lived in the community of Qumran on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. They are most famous for being the keepers of the Dead Sea scrolls which contain the earliest manuscripts of what we know as the Old Testament. Those scrolls were first discovered by archaeologists in 1946 and because they were the oldest copies of these books, bible translators started making a new translation. All previous translations were based on a Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures. These translators now had access to Hebrew scrolls that were much older and thus, more accurate to the source material. Eventually, they published the Revised Standard Bible – the version that's in our pew racks. This didn't bode well with King-James-only churches who claimed that *only* the King James contains the inerrant word of God and thus the only valid translation. See, these older scrolls challenged some of their church's long-held doctrines. Needless

to say, there were some book-fueled bonfires in the 1950s when the RSV came out, and as we have hopefully learned, nothing good ever comes from burning books. Please remember this. Anyway, I digress.

So here's Jesus back home in Galilee. This was soon after he was baptized by John and after he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Luke said that he began teaching in the synagogues throughout Galilee and that he was "praised by everyone." Then he went to his hometown of Nazareth. I've always wondered how people greeted him when he came home. He had become sort of a celebrity teaching in the surrounding synagogues, so it stands to reason that his homecoming was a positive experience, at least in the beginning. Luke writes that Jesus went to the local synagogue and ended up reading a portion of the Isaiah scroll. It makes me wonder if a family friend said, "Hey Jesus, since you're back in town would you like to read scripture at the synagogue this weekend? Maybe say a few words?"

On that day, Jesus read from what we know as the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. I don't know if that scripture was pre-determined, or if it was one that Jesus chose. I like to think it was pre-determined because I get a kick out of reading a passage that the lectionary gives me. Then if someone doesn't like that passage or says, "You chose that scripture to pick on us about some hot-button topic," I can say, "Listen, I'm just reading what the lectionary gave me." That would have been a perfect alibi for Jesus because the passage he read said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." I can imagine the people at the synagogue nodding along as the scripture was being read – caught up in the cadence of the words. Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

So far, so good. In fact, the people at the synagogue were "amazed at his gracious words." They were saying things like, "That's Joseph's son

isn't it?" Chip off the old block. But then Jesus decided to launch into his commentary on that scripture. You know it's going to be a doozy when he prefaces it with, "As the old saying goes, a prophet isn't welcome in his own hometown." He then insinuates that his people have not been doing enough to care for the widows and lepers, and that the "good news" and benefits of this "year of the Lord" might apply to *everyone* – even Syrians. What? Syrians!? Are you kidding? Then Luke writes that everyone in the synagogue "was filled with rage." They drove him out of town so they could throw him off a cliff. Apparently Jesus touched a nerve with his people. And he was just pointing out what was in the scripture he read! So much for being the hometown hero.

This reminds me of similar situations I've seen where a small-town kid goes off to seminary and comes back to preach at his hometown church. At first people are proud of him. "That's our boy! We're so glad he came back here to preach for us!" Especially if it's a town where the kids who pursue higher education never come back because there are better job opportunities "out there." Now, for those of you who are thinking, "What's with the 'he?' Maybe the preacher is 'she!'" Well, Virginia was a little behind in that department. Especially in the smaller towns. The preacher would come home all excited about the opportunity to share what he learned in seminary. Then when the preacher moves the giant King James Bible that's been on the pulpit since the church was founded, and then pulls out a Revised Standard version, people start saying, "Whoa ... wait a minute ... who told him he could do that?" They confront him – "Why didn't you read from the King James?" Then the preacher tells them about the Dead Sea scrolls and how the RSV is now the standard version in institutions of higher learning. Here's a preacher secret – One of the fastest ways for a preacher to get fired from a church is to teach their congregation what they learned in seminary. I can think of a dozen cases where this happened in the Virginia Region. The leaders in the church will say, "That boy went off to seminary and came back roont (which is Appalachian for "ruined.") Maybe they don't physically drive the preacher to a cliff to throw him off, but they do their best to throw them off a psychological cliff. The preacher might think, "I don't get it!

These are my people! Why have they changed so much?” The reality is that it wasn’t the people who changed, it was the preacher. And the preacher discovered that there are some sacred cows that people aren’t willing to give up. They learn, as Jesus said, that “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

By now you may be thinking, “So how does this apply to us? What’s the lesson we’re supposed to learn here? We’re reasonable educated people in a progressive Protestant church. Our big pulpit Bible that’s around here somewhere is an RSV. Do you feel like you’re going to get thrown off a cliff preacher?” No, I don’t. But I do want you to see that as a congregation who considers the priesthood of all believers as one of our most important sacraments, there’s often a price to pay for preaching prophetically. We see this all the time. Heck, maybe even *very* recently. The Herods and the Caesars of the world don’t like being called out. Religious and government leaders balk at scriptures that challenge them. And let’s be real – every single one of the prophetic books in the Old Testament and most of the gospels are a direct challenge to the “Kingdoms of Earth” and those who lead them. We’re learning this in Bible study as we work our way through the Book of Isaiah. Most prophets know the kind of trouble they’ll face when challenging the sacred cows of conventional religion and the kings of the earth, but they do it anyway.

For Jesus’ home synagogue, the “sacred cow” was the idea that the “Day of the Lord” or “the Year of the Lord’s Favor” that Isaiah preaches about isn’t just for the “good, Jewish people like us.” It applies to *everyone*. We are *all* called to look out for the widows, the orphans, the lepers, and all the others living on the margins of what folks consider “polite society.” Jesus just wanted his folks to know that God expects us to extend that love and grace to others too. So, “Just be decent to people” is what got him run out of town? Yes, I’m afraid so. But over the centuries people have been run out of town for much less than that. May we, who are one of many prophetic voices in our community proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor to all, even as we stand on the edge of the cliff.