

### **Third Sunday after the Epiphany**

January 27, 2019

Haven Evangelical Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 19; Luke 4: 14-21

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

There is something comforting about coming home — at least that has been my experience. Home is the familiar — your own bed, the chair you like to sit in to read the morning paper, sounds, smells and order you hardly notice until you're away. Home is the people with whom you can shed all pretense and be yourself. There is a great deal of comfort in the familiar and the people of home, which is why we like to take a bit of home with us when we go away. When the youth head out to Pittsburgh next weekend for YOUTHQUAKE, many of them will take their own pillow or a favorite article of clothing or snack. When I left for the Holy Land, I took a picture someone had given me of three of our teens and the copy of the congregational directory that I keep in my car, with all my notes and additions. I took you with me. You were in my daypack with my passport, currency, camera and other essentials. Know it or not, you have been in Tel Aviv, Galilee, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and yes, even Nazareth.

Nazareth was the home town of Jesus. It was the village of 350 to 400 people where he lived with his mother and father. It was the place where he grew from an infant to a man. Tradition says Nazareth was “home” for Jesus about 30 years until the power of the Spirit led him to be baptized in the river Jordan, to be tempted and strengthened in the desert and then to step into his ministry and calling to be God's very presence in the world. In the gospel, we read today, Jesus has come home. It's the Sabbath. He probably slept in the house where he grew up. Had a light breakfast with Mary. Then he does what he usually does on Sabbath --- he goes to the synagogue to worship and hear God's word.

His neighbors have heard Jesus has been preaching in the surrounding country and gotten high praise. Was there a murmur of anticipation when Jesus walked into his home synagogue? The men of a synagogue take turns standing to read aloud the scripture and sitting to make comments on it. Jesus is selected to read scripture that day. A coincidence or a bit of curiosity to hear their homegrown preacher speak? We don't know. However, Jesus takes the scroll of Isaiah given him and finds a particular passage:

<sup>18</sup>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,  
<sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He sits down. Eyes are riveted on him. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The hometown crowd is impressed. They "were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." They probably exchanged some hometown pride. "It's Joe's boy. Knew him since he was a boy. Who would have guessed?" What was it that impressed them? Did they sense the power of the Spirit upon Jesus? Did they like to hear of good news to the poor, captives, blind and oppressed because they counted themselves among them? Did they think some of Jesus' success as prophet and teacher might rub off on humble Nazareth?

Evan more importantly, what do **we** hear when Jesus speaks? It's easy to get comfortable here in church. It's easy to be so familiar with Bible stories and passages that we don't really listen beyond the words to hear God speaking to us. It's possible to slip into thinking of church as family, worship its weekly supper and the Bible like grandpa's stories told so many times we may be able to repeat them verbatim, but we no longer see the point.

That is one gift of traveling to the Holy Land that I share with you. When you walk in Nazareth, Capernaum, Jerusalem, along the Sea of Galilee you are shaken awake. The gospels we read are not works of fiction. They are not just nice stories about a good man who had a tragic death. Jesus was a flesh and blood man who walked on the earth, breathed air, had to figure out how to dress for the temperature and weather, got hungry, had friends and was God's Word made flesh — God's living presence and revelation who lived in a particular part of the world at a particular time in history that is as real as Hagerstown and 2019. When we believe in this Jesus ---- God in our midst — we must guard against making Jesus and his words what we want them to be rather than what they are. Jesus is real. His words — no matter how baffling or disquieting — are to be taken seriously. As his followers, we are to willingly, deliberately let Jesus and his words into our minds and hearts and let them shape, reform, teach, rattle and challenge us. If Jesus' words get under you skin or upset one of your worldviews, then you are probably not only listening to Jesus, you are hearing what he says.

In a Nazareth synagogue one day many years ago, Jesus proclaimed the mission given to him... the very mission of his followers, of his church, of us. The same power of

the Spirit that filled Jesus is ours today. It was promised and given at our baptism. It is not the power of which the world usually speak... the power of leaders, politicians, CEOs, wheelers and dealers, average self-absorbed man or woman who only worries about themselves --- their comfort, influence, control and getting their own way. Jesus comes filled with power but it is quite a different notion of power. "The power that is *of God* is demonstrated not by any accomplishments or attributes one claims for one's own self but only through what it accomplishes for others. Power is [God's] power only when it sets others free, only when it builds up others, only when used for the betterment of those around you."<sup>1</sup> "Blessed to be a blessing." That is who the baptized, empowered children of God, followers of Jesus are. Sent like Christ, to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery to the blind and set the oppressed free. In that quote from Isaiah, Jesus declared his God-given identity, purpose and vocation... and it is ours, too.

Now that may have a nice ring to it — release people from all kinds of poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression. Sounds good. Sounds noble. Sounds like Jesus. But if we are really listening... if we are really hearing God's Word, we are also a bit uneasy, a bit squirmy in our seats. Jesus is talking about paying attention to folks we may pity but try to avoid. Jesus is speaking of actively caring for the "overlooked, forgotten or discarded. [Jesus] knows that we act in a way to make it seem like some lives matter and some don't, but proclaims that those distinctions fade away in the face of grace and of God [who] see all, loves all, and intends and promise to redeem all."<sup>2</sup> That is not simple or sweet. It is downright provocative. Today and most Sundays, Jesus' words requires changing our mind and habits, our views and our ways. God's word is not intended to be a lullaby but a call to service, a cry for commitment. There *are* times when Jesus's words are very comforting but more often, they are like bottle rockets that rattle us in small and large ways to re-think, reorient our lives, our mission and ourselves. Graced to be gracious. Loved to be lovers. Blessed to be a blessing.

Jesus came home to Nazareth. It went well — at first. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, Jesus would soon find home was no longer a singular place in a village called Nazareth. Home was wherever God called him to bring good news, release, recovery and freedom to all people, deserving or not. So home, for Jesus, was not always an easy place to be but accompanied by the Father and Spirit, it was the right place to be. Home was doing the will of God and loving like God loves. And that definition of home is not tied to one particular time or geographical place in the Middle

East. Being at home in our lives and our discipleship is doing the will of God and loving like God loves. It's not easy but it's possible — at least some of the time. Knowing and loving us, God has provided companions, a strengthening meal, the inciting but life-giving Word so that we will remember that we, too, are filled with the Holy Spirit, anointed and sent to bring healing hope and heart to each day, circumstance or person. When we manage to do that in even the smallest of ways, clearly hear God – Father Son Holy Spirit – say with great love and joy, “Well done. Welcome home.” Amen. Linda M Alessandri 1/26/19

## ENDNOTES

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1. David Lose, “Epiphany 3C: A Peculiar Power” January 18, 2016 as posted at [www.davidlose.net/2016](http://www.davidlose.net/2016)

2. Ibid.