

“Disciples of a Purpose-Driven Lord”

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Scripture: Luke 4:14-30

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “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.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Kevin was their golden boy, make no mistake about it. Since I’d started my ministry at the church less than two months before, numerous members had lauded this young man they had seen grow up from infancy to play an active role in the youth ministry, then, after college, off to seminary. He had sung in the youth choir, preached a youth sermon on Youth Sunday, and been a counselor at camp. Now, he had just the summer before, been called as the pastor of a small church in New York State. But he was back in Princeton for a week of study leave at Princeton Seminary and staying with his parents over the weekend. Unsurprisingly, I was asked if I might invite him to preach that Sunday he would be in town...and how do you turn down the hometown supporters of a golden boy? So Kevin and I ascended the 3 stairs into the chancel and took our places in those ornate, uncomfortable chairs that looked something like small thrones. And the faces of the congregation beamed with pride and good feeling that Sunday.

You have probably guessed how the story unfolded. Kevin had changed...was quite different from the dashing young man-about-church they had sent off to seminary a few years before. Rather than the bright, confident young man with a cheery Jesus-lite message, Kevin had developed a passionate advocacy for peace in what was, in 1982, still the cold war as well as civil struggles in Central America. His sermon was devoted to what was a major issue of the time, the call for a nuclear freeze, a cause with which I was actively sympathetic but to which I would never have thought to devote an entire sermon. I remember one of his points began, "Now if a 20 megaton bombs were to land right here on this pulpit..." and then proceeded to vividly describe the concentric rings of destruction.

Well, the hometown flock did not try to throw Kevin off the brow of a hill that day (West Windsor Township is coastal-plain flat anyway). Rather, their reaction was told in the faces I watched from my little throne chair...transformed from smiles of eager anticipation to furrowed brows indicative of betrayal and anger. The golden boy had changed... and for most of the flock would become *persona non grata*. In the following days, many of them took up an old familiar mantra: "You know! Seminary really wrecks a guy's faith." Homecomings are hard; people change from what we remembered...and we often prefer them the way they were and assumed they would yet be.

I always think of that experience of a hometown boy returning to the site of local pride and admiration when the lectionary brings up the story of Jesus' return to his hometown of Nazareth. It's not quite the same dynamic as Kevin back home, but with enough similar elements to make the connection for me. Pride, anticipation, a shared set of expectations and probably a hope for some recognition or gratitude for being his formative community. "Why, we taught him everything he knows!" Kevin had changed. Jesus had changed from the youngster of much promise they had seen working alongside his father Joseph in the woodshop. Jesus must have gradually become aware of and grown into his unique relation to God and his unique calling in life, or else the temptation experience, just before his homecoming, would have been mere play acting. He struggled to identify and claim his calling. And he came back with a new self-understanding, back to a town that must have been hungry for some recognition. They had heard reports of their golden boy. Nazareth was hardly a town of renown and in fact some spoke of it with a touch of cruel humor, a place incapable of producing anything of note. Now this local young man was causing a stir around the countryside with his powerful acts of healing and his profound teaching in the synagogues.

I wonder what Jesus was feeling as he made his way up the familiar street that Sabbath day toward the synagogue where he had been nurtured in the bosom of Judaism. He must have braced himself for the adulation that would be showered upon him, but also for the hard words he knew the Spirit would prompt from his lips. He skipped any words that might be expected at a homecoming – "It's good to be back..." "I can't thank you enough..." "I've felt your support..." At least Luke doesn't record any such opening graciousness. He rather did what he had done many times before as a teenager and a young adult: he stood to read from the scroll of sacred writings. Isaiah was the book given to him, and how providential, because he knew exactly the words he wanted to proclaim as his *messianic mission statement* here at the outset of his ministry, at the place where his faith was nourished and deepened.

He chose a portion of the prophecy of Isaiah as his keynote – what he was to be all about in the years ahead – and he chose a passage that was inclusive of both tenderness and bold liberation: good news for the poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the dawn of the year of the Lord’s favor, that is, the Year of Jubilee. The year of God’s Jubilee was a notion in the Hebrew faith that never fully got enacted in practice. It was a year when the fields were to lie fallow; slaves were to be set free, debts were to be forgiven, there was to be some redistribution of land. It was to be a year to acknowledge that God alone is the “owner” of all things, a time to be freed of the spirit of possessiveness and “reshuffle the deck” of God’s bounty.

So when Jesus wanted to announce what he and his life were most about, he chose the words of a prophet, words that spoke of liberating changes for all of God’s children. He identified himself with the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, and then said, in effect, today, this longing for fairness, compassion, and freedom is becoming reality in the one who stands before you. Isaiah 61, from which he read, is one of the servant songs of that prophecy and “anointed me” means “made me the Messiah or Christ.” It is present reality. “Today,” in fact, is the very first words of his own that Luke has Jesus speak. It is quite popular in our culture today for organizations to develop mission statements succinctly setting forth their purpose for being. That is what Jesus is doing at Nazareth, proclaiming the purpose that will drive his ministry for the next three years, starting “today.” That purpose is, in the words of Fred Carddock, that “the Christ is God’s servant who will bring to reality the longing and the hope of the poor, the oppressed, and the imprisoned,” and “usher in the amnesty, the liberation, and the restoration associated with the proclamation of the year of jubilee.”¹ We should not be surprised; after all, it was also Luke who gave us Mary’s great hymn of purpose for the son she was to bear. In the Magnificent, she sings of her child as the agency of God’s reordering of the society’s inverted sense of justice and generosity, the unevenness and unfairness corrected.

I have frequently heard among Christians the false dichotomy assumed of the Old and New Testaments...that yes, the Old Testament prophets were about creating a more just society, a peaceable society, a communal as well as individual righteousness; but that Jesus was about things spiritual, one’s relationship to God, one’s personal faith. And he was, of course, but not to the exclusion of the prophetic vision that he chose to announce his ministry. In other words, he knew the life of faith is of one piece, that one’s relationship to God and her commitment to a just community are inextricably bound together.

I think it took some courage for Jesus to use these prophetic words to announce to his hometown folks his messianic mission. It’s a purpose that calls people to change and reexamine attitudes about privilege and possessiveness. But the people who heard were so bursting with pride, that, as often happens, rather than hearing the sense of the words, they were more likely simply aware that here in their midst, their widely-hailed native son was reading the scripture to them. And their response was nothing less than a profusion of “Bravo’s!” They were amazed; simply dazzled by this local boy, astonished that someone so familiar, “Joseph’s son,” had spoken so impressively at his homecoming.

Until Jesus showed them their own blindness and possessiveness and narrow-minded expectations of God’s chosen one. They assumed they knew who Jesus is and therefore what

might be expected of him. Now Jesus gets preemptive here and assaults their self-serving assumptions of preferential treatment in a manner that may seem to us ungraciously challenging of his supportive neighbors – kind of “picking a fight.” Aware that the implications of what he is about may not be congruent with their expectations, he probably decides to cut to the chase and get the hard part out in the open. He knows that hard words of exhortation to others tend to be met with the response, “Well, why don’t you first get *your* act together...” - so he preemptively quotes an old proverb anticipating that response: “Doctor, cure yourself.” Then he precipitates further conflict by reminding them of two stories from their scripture involving Elijah and Elisha, when God’s agents of mercy and healing ministered to outsiders –Gentiles - when there were plenty of insiders – Israelites- in similar need. The prophets rescued, not the hometown folk, but those who could not call themselves God’s people. They got the point! And that’s when the sunshine of that Sabbath in Nazareth became overshadowed with dark clouds: confusion, affront, resentment, rage, and even violence.

I believe that here is where this story becomes an especially lively word to us today in the church, where we can so easily get caught up in “small circle” expectations: what can Jesus do for us...for our families...for our church? Jesus does have great blessings in store for those who are the Body of Christ, but a purpose beyond our own spiritual maintenance. Blessed to *be* a blessing...and that often means being stretched beyond our community comfort zones to be disciples of this purpose-driven Lord of prophetic impact to a wounded world and its wounded peoples. It usually means inconvenience...often sacrifice...occasionally suffering; and it always means letting go of our possessive claims on Jesus. Surely a question to constantly keep before us is something like this: We know that Christ is *for us*...but who is our neighbor that we haven’t imagined the gospel is for, the neighbor to whom and for whom God is calling us and using us to bring both tender compassion and prophetic justice?

Homecomings can be hard, and this one was hard for Jesus. But praise God, it was the homecoming that shows us who Jesus was, and who we are. Amen.

ⁱ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Series (John Know Press, Louisville, 1970), p.62.