

“It Did Not Go Well in Nazareth”

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Luke 4:14-30

You Can't Go Home Again is how the novelist Thomas Wolfe put it. Sometimes you can't go home, I guess, because people don't want you back unless, of course, they can control who you are and limit what you would like to be. And so, it should be no surprise that things didn't go well in Nazareth. Mark and Matthew put this episode of Jesus reading from the Isaiah scroll late in Jesus' ministry. St. Luke, however, puts this episode at the beginning of his ministry, when he was still a little wet from his baptism by his mentor and cousin, John the Baptizer. Scholars suggest that Luke may have sacrificed chronology in order to make clear what Jesus' ministry will consist of and what he and his followers were to be and do, not least you and me.

When we left Jesus last week, things were looking pretty good. He was center-stage before an admiring congregation, reading a beautiful passage from the prophet Isaiah, who longed for good news for the poor, freedom for the prisoner, sight for the blind, and justice for the oppressed. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. Oh, look, it's Joseph's boy! The women said, “Oh, remember how he helped us at the bazaar year after year. And guys from Thursday's study group agreed that he could put up his share of dry wall when they used to go to Omak to rebuild houses lost in the fires. Some may have heard something about his strange birth, but he didn't appear to be anything special or strange growing up in Nazareth; nobody really expected anything out of the ordinary to come out of Nazareth. In every church there's a sceptic or two, who thought to themselves, “If this local boy was willing to peddle a few miracles to perfect strangers in other places, surely he could work a few miracles here at home!” And this is where everything goes haywire.

One commentator writes: “Jesus refuses to go home in the ways that matter most to his kin. He refuses to be at home, to stay at home, that is, to allow his home to define him.... In essence, Jesus says – “I am not yours. I don't belong to you. I am not yours to claim or contain.” And it probably hurt to hear him say it. But worse, he starts citing God's long history of prioritizing the outsider, the foreigner, the stranger. He reminds his town folk that Elijah is sent to care for the widow at Zarephath and not the widows of Israel. Elisha was instructed to heal Naaman the Syrian, not the lepers in Israel. Don't know why Jesus had to say all this, but his hometown folk didn't like Jesus implying that God is always crossing borders and in the business of working on the margins. Doesn't he know, doesn't he care that things need improving here in Nazareth? Don't go on and on telling us that God is busy doing exciting things in remote and unlikely places. Oh, his passion got him into hot water; his passion for Isaiah's long-awaited hope stirred up a beehive that day. And the people grabbed hold of that whippersnapper, dragged him out of church, and tried to push him off a cliff!

And it is true: The first job of a Messiah is to get people to stop looking for one; his job is to get people busy working with the One who has come. But his townspeople preferred to wait for a different Messiah, I guess. And us?

I know, you may be thinking, “Pastor, we're Methodists. We don't like outspoken people rubbing things in our faces. Passion makes us nervous, and controversy is something we avoid.” I know, I was raised Methodist, from the cradle. I prefer a Jesus that doesn't offend me and my

preferences and biases; I've got everything just about the way I want them to be. Ever feel that way? Perhaps I shouldn't admit it, but I'm not sure I want Jesus showing up in here, not if he is going to read from the Isaiah scroll. We got a few miles of cliffs not far from here. But, I guess, there is only one Jesus (many Christs, it seems), and Luke describes him as one who pushed hard against his listeners' cherished assumptions. One blogger I follow, Debi Thomas, asked herself, but I heard her ask me, too – "When was the last time Jesus made me angry, angry enough to run him out of town? When was the last time he touched whatever it is we call holy — our progressivism, our conservatism, our theology, our denomination, our bibles, our prayer life, our politics – and asked us to look *beyond it* to find him?"

In a couple of weeks, I'm headed to my hometown to visit my Mom. I hope it goes well; I'm sure it will. I'll likely still be thinking about Nazareth and wondering where I fit in this story. Am I one of the townspeople? Claiming to know Jesus pretty well, have I already domesticated him and his assignment for me? Isaiah's long-awaited hope was renewed in Jesus and that hope fueled his hope. But not hope as postponement – "Oh when the Messiah comes." When he said "Today," his hope became our assignment.