

Rick Snyder  
First Presbyterian Church  
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Kingdom Priorities  
Luke 4:14-30

It's often said that "we can't go home again!" because life inevitably changes – fields become subdivisions; an old girlfriend is now married with three children; the house we grew up in is now painted a different color and has a screened-in porch.

But when we go home, some things don't change. People remember us as we were years earlier. I grew up in First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, PA, a huge colonial church nestled on 350 acres in north central Bethlehem. Our pastors were luminaries. Elam Davies became the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago. Lloyd Ogilvie became the Senate chaplain. I can still picture them mounting the steps to the pulpit, opening a door, and then spreading out their notes. Lloyd Ogilvie's voice was so deep and resonant that my parents used to say, "God must have a voice like Lloyd's."

So I was anxious when I stepped into that pulpit one July Sunday in 1971 to share how I believed that God was calling me into the ministry. I wasn't the easiest student to manage in Sunday School. Then there was that incident with the paper airplane launched from the back of the balcony during one of Dr. Davies' sermons. Truthfully I can't remember whether I threw it, or whether Al Timm threw it. But since Al is also an ordained Presbyterian minister and now the executive Presbyter of Detroit Presbytery, perhaps the blame should be equally shared. On that July Sunday, I shared my sense of God's call and all went well until a former Sunday School teacher came through the line, looked at me very closely, and gasped, "My God, it is you."

Our story this morning is about homecoming, about how Jesus returns to His home town of Nazareth. In the preceding months, John has baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. During Jesus' baptism, the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends, and a voice from heaven declares, "You are my beloved Son; with you, I am well-pleased." The Spirit then leads Jesus into the wilderness to fast and pray, to discern God's leading for His ministry. And then Jesus takes long months to do seemingly . . . nothing! Our story this morning occurs months after His return from the wilderness.

Sometimes we do need seasons of rest and preparation. It takes years to become a surgeon. We take classes; endure organic chemistry; sit for exams, finish a residency. It's all preparation.

Moses spends forty years in the wilderness before his encounter with God at the burning bush, before God calls him to march to Pharaoh and declare, "Let my people go." Moses must think, "What good is all this waiting?" But there in the silence and solitude, God is preparing his heart, teaching him to trust, communing with him, filling his soul with passion. So when God needs him, Moses is ready.

Sometimes it's good to get off the treadmill; to lie fallow; to slow down to rebuild a relationship or rekindle our passion or get in touch with our hearts. We don't know what Jesus did in these months of preparation. But for a time, He took things slow.

Then one day He shows up in his hometown of Nazareth, a hardscrabble village of 600 in rural Galilee. On the Sabbath, He shows up for worship, as was His custom. Like all of us, Jesus also needed focused opportunities to praise God and to listen to His word. The rabbi, recognizing Jesus as a visiting dignitary, invites Him to come forward to preach. He hands Jesus the scroll, and Jesus finds a Messianic prophecy. Then with emphasis, He reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to

the poor, freedom for the prisoners, the recovery of sight for the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This prophecy is first offered by Isaiah 600 years earlier as Israel limps back from exile, broken and humiliated. As Isaiah offers his prophecy, Israel is destitute; her cities crushed; her temple burned; her fields covered with weeds. Israel wonders if God even cares for her. So she asks the question posed by the author of Lamentations, "Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us, Lord, that we may return, renew our days of old. Unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us without measure."

Jesus chooses to read this prophecy in the synagogue in Nazareth because He comes to offer healing and restoration. He comes offering the good news of God's grace, release to those experiencing bondage and oppression. He comes to make the blind see, the dumb speak, the deaf hear, and the lame walk. Think of what He offers:

"I come to bring good news to the poor." We're all stunned by the devastation in Haiti, and wonder why this poorest of the poor countries of the world should suffer so grievously. With few building codes and substandard housing, thousands were buried in the rubble. Roads were closed; for a time even the control tower at the Port-au-Prince airport was inoperable. Now hunger and disease stalk this island nation that was also recently battered by two major hurricanes. So where's the good news?

Part of the answer is that Jesus impels us to be the good news. Our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance immediately released \$100,000 to help; our mission committee likewise gave. Jesus calls us to give, to stay informed, and to pray. Someone has said, "to the hungry, the only way in which compassion dare appear is in the form of bread."

Jesus says, "I come to bring freedom to the prisoner." When the exiles limp home from captivity in Babylon, they're finally free – free to worship freely, practice their faith, and raise their families. They can finally be themselves.

But aren't most of us bound up, hemmed in, or held captive in some way? We struggle with fears and anxieties, addictions, habits that we can't seem to overcome. One of my good friends has been quitting smoking – for twenty years. A year after the crash of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River, many survivors still struggle. Flight attendant, Doreen Welsh, has panic attacks if she's too close to water. Jorge Morgado is afraid to fly. Others struggle with claustrophobia or nightmares. We all need a gift that Jesus offers, the peace that passes understanding. It passes understanding because it comes when we least expect it.

Jesus says, "I come to give sight to the blind." In his hymn, Amazing Grace, John Newton, a slave trader turned preacher, speaks of how he "once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." How could Newton not see the horrors of the slave trade? How could he have so insulated himself from the suffering of fellow human beings that he turned a blind eye to the loss of 20,000 men, women and children on the ships that he captained. But after his conversion during a violent storm in the West Indies, Newton's eyes were opened. Jesus helped him see, to see with the eyes of God!

Jesus says, "I come to release the oppressed." One of the saddest realities of the starvation in Darfur, in the Sudan, is that the famine was deliberate. The Sudanese government burned seed, destroyed tractors, killed farmers, poisoned water, and stole beasts of burden in a calculated attempt to break the backs of Sudanese villagers. Jesus is repulsed when justice is denied, and calls upon us to defend justice. The prophet Micah

roars, "God has shown you, o people, what is good – to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

And Jesus says, "I come to declare the year of the Lord's favor." Once every 50 years, Israel celebrated a year of Jubilee when debts are forgiven, land is restored to its original owners, and slaves are released. So the poor do not stay poor; the lowly can once again make a livelihood; families rent by poverty can once again live together.

So Jesus finishes this reading from Isaiah, declaring the hope and promise of His forthcoming ministry. Everyone in the synagogue is spellbound. He rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, sits down to teach, and then makes a fateful statement, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." The Messianic age has come; the long promised fulfillment of Israel's hope has dawned. At first, everyone nods pleasantly. Wow! What a gracious message? He's a great speaker. But then someone interjects, "But isn't he Joseph's son, the carpenter, the kid who grew up down the street? Who is he to claim he's the Messiah?" Suddenly you feel the tension.

Jesus now ups the ante, "I tell you no prophet is accepted in his home town. Take Elijah. He could have served many Israelite widows during the famine, but he helped a Gentile woman in Sidon. Or take Elisha. He could have healed an Israelite leper, but he healed Naaman, a Gentile." For a few moments, there is a shocked silence. Wait a minute! What's this messianic pretender saying? This kid who grew up down the street claims to be the Messiah, but he's not doing what any good Messiah should, namely, raise an army to chase out the Romans. And how dare He talk about Gentiles, not we chosen people! Gentiles? The synagogue faithful become so angry that they seize Jesus and drag Him out to a hilltop intending to toss Him down and stone Him. But Jesus somehow walks through the crowd and leaves.

What makes the crowd so angry? They are angry because Jesus claims to be the long-promised Messiah. "Today this reading is fulfilled in your hearing! " Jesus infuriates the crowds every time He uses the term, "I am," the statement of divinity spoken by God at the burning bush when Moses asks, "By what name shall I call you?" and God's response is, "I am!" But now Jesus is the One declaring, "I am . . . I am the Bread of Life . . . I am the Light of the World . . . I am the good shepherd and the door for the sheep. I am the resurrection and the life." These words enrage devout Jews!

Many people today prefer to see Jesus reduced to a teacher or a moralist. But as C.S. Lewis writes, "You have two choices regarding Jesus. Either He is crazy, on the level of a man who says that he is a poached egg, or Jesus is who He says He is. For no one can say the things Jesus says about Himself, unless He is one or the other."

What makes the crowd so angry? They are angry because Jesus wants to reach out to both Jew and Gentile, to reach beyond the borders of God's chosen people to the alien, the unclean, the stranger.

In the movie *Invictus*, Morgan Freeman portrays Nelson Mandela as he becomes President of South Africa after the end of apartheid. Commentators expect a blood bath and a civil war that long-oppressed blacks will rise up in a fury of indignation. But Mandela wants to create a nation open to all races. So when he arrives at his office on the very first day and sees white employees packing their offices, he calls a staff meeting. "If you are afraid that I have come to take your job, you are mistaken. Our focus is to face forward, to reconcile, to build a new South Africa. If you feel you cannot work with your new government, then it is best that you do leave. But I need you and your country needs you. If you can stay, I urge you do to so."

In particular, blacks hate the Springboks, South Africa's predominantly white rugby team. So a sports council votes to ban the name. Mandela instantly drives to the meeting and begs the council to reconsider. "If we

destroy what the whites feel is sacred," he says, "then we are what they fear the most. Instead let us surprise them with our graciousness and forgiveness." By reaching beyond the comfort of his class and his race, Mandela forged a unity that created a new South Africa. That is what Jesus is always after – helping us reach beyond our comfort zones to any of our neighbors in need.

Finally I need to ask, "When do I want to get rid of Jesus?" Is it when He tells me to pray for my enemies? Or when He asks me to forgive someone who has hurt me? Or when I'm to take the high road, or to keep my mouth shut, or to get out of my comfort zone because someone needs the love of Jesus. The Jesus of our story won't let us get too comfortable. He will challenge us, surprise us, and push us! So may we never be afraid to go where He is sending us!