

“They 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.” Luke 4:29

We’re not absolutely sure that the present site of Nazareth is correct. Nazareth exists now in Galilee as a sprawling modern town with old churches and shrines in it. But there are no cliffs in that area now, maybe there were in ancient times. Yes, there are hills and such, but nothing that you can’t roll down on a summer’s day and get more than a grass stain on your clothes. Nazareth was a small town in Jesus’ day and probably had no more than a couple thousand people living in it. Jesus was a small town boy. When the Romans came and re-conquered the land in AD 70 they probably swept the town away with all its inhabitants and it was lost forever until somebody decided to re-establish the town for the sake of Jesus’ memory. The town would probably have sunk into oblivion had it not been for the one product of its life that became a household name the world over. The rest of the town is completely and totally insignificant and not worth mentioning. But it was Jesus’ home town and he went back to his hometown and entered the synagogue one Saturday and read from Isaiah, insulted his neighbors and they tried, unsuccessfully, to kill him. Nothing more is heard of the town in scripture or in history. The town was so insignificant that in John’s Gospel one of the disciples asks if anything good can come out of Nazareth. For the first five hundred years of the Christian era pilgrims didn’t even bother to go there to visit the place. Nazareth was nowhere.

But Jesus went back. We all go back to our hometowns at least once in our lives. It’s fun to see where we grew up and if the house is still standing. We look for the changes in the street signs, the new shops, the empty stores, and if the post office is really going out of business. I went back to my home town last week for the baptism of my nephew, Jacob. Mary and I were god-parents again and it was really great to be there at the baptism and just stand there and say, “I do” when called upon. I saw some old faces that I hadn’t seen in a while. Mark Hanson and his mother said hello (no, not the presiding bishop of the ELCA although he too is a son of that

congregation). I saw folks I hadn't seen in ages and some of them tried to get a hold of me and were looking for me but couldn't find me in the crowd. It was good to be back. Yes, things have changed. Miller's drug store, where we used to get hamburgers and cherry cokes, is gone. The post office is closing its doors. There's a new bank on the corner but Speedy Market is still there and just as cramped as can be, but when you go in you can see Mrs. Elsing, the wife of your High School German teacher, shopping for groceries the same as you.

And everybody asks you what you're doing now and where you live and what's new with your family. It's good to go back and reconnect with folks and re-establish old ties.

So, Jesus went back to his hometown. He had just started his ministry and didn't even have any disciples yet, at least not in Luke's Gospel. He had been baptized in the Jordan River, he had been tempted by Satan, he had even started to preach in various towns and synagogues and everybody was saying good things about him. He usually went to the synagogues because they were the houses of prayer for all Jews and everybody went to synagogue on Saturdays for worship. So did Jesus.

Everything went well, at first. He got up to read, as was the custom then and still is now. People read from the Bible in synagogues just as we do in church. That's where the tradition of reading the Bible came from, after all. Any adult male who had gone through a bar mitzvah ceremony could read from the scroll. Jesus picked a nice hopeful passage that had messianic overtones to it and everybody liked what he said and how he said it. It seemed that it was a good homecoming for everybody.

But the story doesn't end there. As with any homecoming, there will be people who know who you are when you step out of the car on that old familiar street. They will recognize you immediately and either come over to shake your hand or hide behind the corner. Well, these folks in Nazareth knew who Jesus was because he had been in their synagogue before taking classes from the Rabbi. He had gone on errands through the town for his mom and dad. He had

played with them in the streets and had run off to the hills around town with his friends looking for adventure. They knew him. So they said to each other, “Say, isn’t that Joseph’s boy?” We don’t hear much about Joseph in the Gospels, except maybe in the Gospel of Matthew. There’s not much in Luke either. But the folks in Nazareth would have remembered him. They would have remembered the carpenter who made their tables and mended their chairs. “Don’t we know him? Isn’t this Joe’s kid?” they asked.

No, actually, he’s not. He’s not Joseph’s boy. Maybe the town’s folk didn’t mean it in a condescending way, maybe they meant it in a complimentary fashion. Maybe the question was one of those inquiries that was one of surprise, mostly, at what this young man had become since leaving home. Or maybe it was indeed a condescending question. After all, if we are to assume that Jesus had just left home only a few weeks or months before beginning his ministry, then maybe the question was more like, “Who does he think he is?”

But it doesn’t matter whether the question was malicious or not. It was still wrong. It was the wrong question because it carried a human assumption along with it. It bore the mark of an earthly understanding that was not sufficient to truly identify who Jesus was. He was not the son of Joseph but the Son of God. He was not merely the local hometown boy who made a splash somewhere else and was coming back to have another home cooked meal by his mother and shake a few hands along the way. He was on a mission. That mission had to do with the redemption of the whole creation and not just a homecoming in that little town. He was on a mission to save humanity and the world and this small crowd in this small town in this small country needed to know that.

The folks in Nazareth didn’t understand that when Jesus read that passage in Isaiah about proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor that he was talking about himself. They didn’t understand that what Jesus was beginning his universal ministry right there in that little town. I wonder if any of them ever understood because we have no record of anybody from Nazareth

following Jesus. Did any of his boyhood friends attach themselves to his ministry? All we know is that his mother, Mary, and brother, James, who is identified as a leader in the early church, were followers of Jesus, but there is no mention of anybody else from Nazareth.

Maybe that's because the folks from Nazareth didn't like what Jesus had to say. In fact, they got so angry with him, so incensed and enraged at what he said that they figured this guy's gotta go and they tried to murder him.

Jesus began by directly antagonizing his audience. He was not trying to be polite or nice at all. He was being abrasive and provocative. He put words in their mouths to begin his sermon. He said that they'd probably want to see a few tricks before they accepted him. He said that no prophet was accepted in his own home town. He was right. He was right, of course, and events would quickly prove him right. But if you had been in that crowd that day don't you think you'd have been a little angry with this young man? I mean, don't you think you'd have asked yourself where he got off saying things like that to folks who had grown up with him? Wouldn't all of us be angry at this upstart who has the temerity to assume the role of divine prophet when we knew exactly where he had skinned his knee when he was seven years old? It is the scandal of the incarnation that this crowd could not get over. It was the scandal of God become flesh, entering our world in the guise of a man. It was the offense of the way God did it that caused and has caused so much anger in the world. That God became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of a common laborer from Galilee is the offense that sets neighbor against neighbor and even family against family. It is the scandal that will not go away. And Jesus made it worse.

He made it worse by reminding the crowd of two stories that they knew very well. They were famous stories and we read them in our churches as well. These stories had been told and re-told countless times right there in that very synagogue. They were good stories, until Jesus told them.

He told them in a way that they actually became indictments of the people he was addressing. He said that when there was a drought in ancient Israel the prophet Elijah was sent out of the country of his homeland and God sent him far away up north to Lebanon, to pagan country. It was there that he helped a foreign, pagan, woman and her son. Elijah's successor, Elisha, also helped a foreign pagan and cured him of leprosy. Jesus was telling his audience that they did not hold the special place in God's heart that they thought they did. He told them that they were no more important to God than anybody else and that they could not rely on their station in life as any guarantee that they would receive better treatment from the Almighty than a foreign widow in Zarephath.

Well that was quite enough for the hometown folks. That was it. They were filled with rage. Jesus had upset the apple cart. He had started out okay and everybody thought he had done well, but he had not gone on to confirm their self-assumptions and the way they thought of the world. He had provoked them and antagonized them. He had made them angry. Now they grabbed him, dragged him to the top of the cliff and were ready to toss him off, but it was not time for that. It was not God's time for that. He walked between them and on his way. The cross would be waiting for Jesus in a couple of years. The cross would be his punishment for upsetting all those people who didn't want to hear what he had to say. The cross would wait until the offense of his incarnation became so intense that the authorities would have to do away with him. But not today. Not that day in Nazareth.

"Familiarity breeds contempt," as the old saying goes. This story in Luke's Gospel proves it. It proves that God in Christ is not who we assume he is. Jesus is always the elusive presence in life that never seems to fit our comfort zones. He was a man of bold courage who would fulfill his mission one way or another even if it meant offending the very people he grew up with. He could not afford to let them think that he was just a man. He could not afford to let them continue in their familiar assumptions about life and death and life after death. He had to

change people's minds even if it meant enraging them. It's no use glossing over this stuff in the Bible. Here is a story that is very difficult to read and preach on. It's not something we like to hear like the story of miracles and parables and the calling of the disciples. This is not a soothing story, but a troubling one. This is not a calming tale of a therapeutic Jesus. This is a story of a Jesus who makes pre-emptive strikes against false assumptions. It is a story of a feverish God eager to correct the hearts and minds of his people. It is the tale of Christ who doesn't care who you are or what team you cheer for. He cares about the truth and where you fit into it. He cares about the truth and if you know it. He cares about the truth and if you live your life in it and He is willing to use any means necessary to get you to pay attention. It is one thing to have the strength of your convictions, it is another thing to be so rigidly bound to your way of thinking that you can't hear a young man from Galilee giving his first sermon. The folks in Nazareth were too set in their ways and their thoughts, they needed to be jolted out of their complacency.

Maybe they didn't like what Jesus had to say, but I wonder if they remembered it. Maybe they didn't like the way he insulted them, but they probably marked that date on their calendars. Who knows, maybe sometime later, even years later, one or another of them might have presented themselves to James or Jesus' mother and said, "You know, I was there when Jesus came back home and I heard him speak. I was there when we dragged him to the cliff and then saw him walk right through us. I didn't understand then, but I think I want to understand now. I think I want to understand how it is that God will go to such lengths to reclaim his world. I want to understand how it is that Jesus was willing to go through all that suffering just for us, even when we were the ones who wanted to kill him. How can God love that much that He is willing to risk our anger in order to do it?"

This is the love that God shows us in Christ, that He is willing to risk enraging those he loves in order to love them and will do so even to death. It might be a hard thing to listen to, but it will change your life. Amen.