Sermon 02-03-19

Returning to Nazareth for the First Time

Luke 4:21-30

**Sermon Starter**

Many of us have childhood memories of the towns from our early childhood. Some of us were born and raised in the same town. Others may have been born in one town and raised in another. Whichever the case, the question I want to ask this morning is did you ever leave for one reason or another only to return some time later?

**GRAPHIC: Maybe you entered the military or went off to college or graduate school. Maybe you took a job or started a company and worked long and hard to build it up.** Then finally one day you returned home. What was it like? What was it like returning to the town of your youth once you had been out in the world for a while?

Was it like the title of our sermon this morning, Returning to Nazareth for the First Time? Was there something different about it?

This week we are continuing where we left off in Luke’s Gospel last week.1 Jesus had left the carpenter’s shop in his hometown a few months before this and had quickly gotten quite a reputation as a teacher, healer and worker of wonders. Everyone in Galilee seemed to be talking about him.

**GRAPHIC: So, when he came back to Nazareth for the first time, the people who’d known him as he was growing up were eager to see what he could do and to hear what he had to say.** They got their chance in the town synagogue at the first Sabbath day service after his return. “We’re glad to hear about all these great things that Jesus is going to do,” said the people of Nazareth. “But we want to be sure that he’s doing them for us.”

When the time came for the reading of scripture, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Jesus. **GRAPHIC: He found there a passage that spoke of the great things that God was going to do. It told of how God would send his Spirit upon someone to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed.** It would be the time of the Lord’s favor.2

“A wonderful text,” thought the people of Nazareth. “One of my favorites,” whispered someone. “But reading the scriptures isn’t hard. Let’s hear what kind of sermon the hometown boy is going to give us.”

Jesus rolled up the scroll, looked at them and said firmly, **GRAPHIC: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”** That was as much as to say, “I am the one God has anointed with the Spirit. I am proclaiming good news to the poor, giving sight to the blind and doing all those other great things that the prophet spoke of.”

The people in the synagogue were “amazed” at these “gracious words.” Oh, there would have been some doubts. After all, this is Joe’s boy. We remember him running around as a little kid and later making chairs for us. Can he really be the one to fulfill those promises?

**Going over the edge**

But it did sound great. Jesus was saying that what he had read wasn’t just the writing of an ancient prophet but something that was going to happen here and now. And the people wanted to see it happen — not someplace else but here in Nazareth, for them.

Jesus understood all that. And he could have performed one of those surprising cures that they’d heard about him doing in other places to authenticate his claim. Instead, he told the people of Nazareth that it wasn’t all about them.

**GRAPHIC: “Remember some of our history that we read about in the prophets,” he told them. Back during that terrible famine in Elijah’s day, God didn’t first tell the prophet to help some Israelites but sent him to a Canaanite woman and her household in Sidon.** And later, it wasn’t a leper in Israel whom the prophet Elisha healed, but Naaman the Syrian.

A Canaanite — one of the people Israel historically was supposed to conduct holy war against and get rid of! And Naaman — not just a Syrian but a captain in an enemy army that used to raid Israelite territory! If Jesus had said, “I’m taking my talents to Jericho,” the Nazarenes would have been unhappy, but at least the people in that city were Jews. But when Jesus suggested that he cared about Canaanites and Syrians — well, that sent them over the edge. Some may have even surmised that Jesus even cared about those accursed Romans currently ruling the Jews! **GRAPHIC: And as to being sent over the edge, they wanted to push Jesus over the edge of a nearby cliff and kill him.** But that wasn’t how he was going to die.

**A light to the nations**

It’s not so surprising that the people of Nazareth had that kind of attitude about foreigners. After all, they knew themselves to be God’s chosen people. Long ago, when God called their ancestor Abraham to leave his native country and come to Canaan, God promised to make his descendants a great nation and to give them that land. Those promises were remembered and repeated in the Hebrew scriptures. And knowing that they were God’s chosen people, they expected God to look out for them. The blind who would be given sight and the captives who would be set free should be Israelites.

It was easy for the chosen people to forget that God didn’t choose them just for their own benefit. But those promises that God had made to Abraham in the beginning included **GRAPHIC: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”3**And later God would tell his servant Israel, **GRAPHIC: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”4**

That’s how Jesus, the man of Israel, saw himself. **GRAPHIC: “I am the light of the world,”** he said.5 He is the one through whom God’s promises to all the people of the world will be fulfilled.

Things didn’t go well on that day in Jesus’ hometown, but what Jesus said there is good news for us — and for everyone. God’s forgiveness, acceptance and offer of community is not just for the people of Israel — though of course it is for them — but for all people. It points toward that heavenly scene in the book of Revelation with **GRAPHIC: “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”6**The kingdom of God is intended for you and for me and for everyone, regardless of color or language or anything else.

And we are not to be merely passive members of that kingdom. The one who said that he was the light of the world also told his disciples, **GRAPHIC: “You are the light of the world. ... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”7**We are given the honor of being the hands and feet and mouths God uses to bring about his reign.

**Not the stars of the show**

This positive message, however, needs to be accompanied by a warning. Christians have sometimes thought of themselves as now being God’s chosen people with the same kind of narrowmindedness that the people of Nazareth displayed. The idea that the people of Israel are not God’s people any longer has been the source of numerous evils through the centuries.

And from the beginning of European settlements on this continent, the idea that America is the new “promised land” has been a source of problems. It often meant that the people originally living here could be treated the way the Israelites were said to have treated the people of Canaan in the Old Testament, which was bad news for Native Americans. And the idea that this nation has been more blessed by God — and maybe deserves to be blessed more — than other nations, has resulted in an American civil religion that has little to do with Christianity. If you are not familiar with the term civil religion, it is **GRAPHIC: the blending of general religious values, practices, rites, and symbols with those of a particular nation or political unit.**

That is simply a reminder and a warning that we are not the stars of the show, not as individuals, as a nation or as a religious tradition. It’s not just about us. The star is **GRAPHIC: The Son of God who came to be one of us;** who, in the power of the Spirit, brought good news to the poor and proclaimed release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. It is Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again to overcome the separation of sinners from God and the divisions among members of the human family. He is the light of the world who graciously invites us to reflect his light, **GRAPHIC: to be those with whom God works to move creation toward the fullness of the kingdom of God.**

Let us hear that and cooperate with God’s intention for us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1 Luke 4:14-21.

2 Luke 4:18-19, cf. Isaiah 61:1-2.

3 Genesis 12:3.

4 Isaiah 49:6.

5 John 8:12.

6 Revelation 7:9.

7 Matthew 5:14, 16.