

The Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 24, 2010

St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Boerne, Texas

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“Hometown Hero”

After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River and after he was tempted in the wilderness he went home to Nazareth. Some Biblical scholars contend that Nazareth was the home of a first century Hasidic sect called *Nazoreans*. They expected the Messiah to come from within this sect of Judaism. So when their favorite son returned to Nazareth and stood up to preach in the synagogue that Sabbath day their hearts must have been filled with pride. A hometown boy, Joseph and Mary’s son, had returned home to fulfill their deepest hope.

For his homecoming sermon Jesus chose as his text words from the 61st chapter of the prophet Isaiah. The words he read that Sabbath echoed off the walls of Jesus’ home synagogue like thunder.

Hear the Word of God as it is recorded in the 4th chapter of the gospel of Luke:

Luke 4:14-21

Luke tells us that Jesus went home to Nazareth. *Home* is a somewhat elusive term for our generation. A few years ago, right after we moved to Corpus Christi, our son, Matt, came to visit and was in our kitchen there visiting with us. Though he has lived in Austin for most of his life, he tenderly turned to Linda that day and said to her: “*You know Mom, this is home now.*” Linda was very touched which caused her to temporarily lose her head and she said hopefully: “*It’s home because your mom and dad live here?*” “*No,*” Matt responded without a pause, “*it’s the little white step-stool in the kitchen and the couches in the living room and my old bed.*” Sometimes we don’t know when to quit while we are ahead.

For some the word *home* brings to mind an immediate picture. A hometown. A house on a particular street with particular pieces of furniture and, perhaps, particular members of a family. That is *my* image of home. A small white frame house at 513 Edgefield in a small town with Plaza Theater on the square and a cotton gin down the road and an Elementary School called Central and a Presbyterian Church called First even though until I was nearly in high school it was the only. Even though it has been over forty years since I lived there home still has very concrete meaning for me.

For some the word *home* is harder to define. You moved too young and too often or your family was too fragmented. You never had the opportunity to sink roots deep enough that you could call one particular place your hometown or one particular house your *home*. In his poem *The Death of the Hired Man* Robert Frost wrote that:

Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.

Which is true for many. But certainly not for all.

Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again* is transparently autobiographical. The main character, George Webber, is, like Thomas Wolfe, a novelist living in New York. He writes a successful story about his family and the small town where he grew up. His actual life is very far removed from his hometown.

Then one day he receives word that his beloved Aunt Maw has died. He rides a train south to attend the funeral. The train takes him through New Jersey and Maryland and Virginia to North Carolina. For the first time in years he returns to his hometown of Libya Hill. But at Aunt Maw's funeral he is shocked by the outrage and the hatred that greets him. His family and his life-long friends feel naked and exposed by the truths they have seen in themselves in the story he wrote. Their fury drives him from his home and he spends the rest of his wife wandering through pre-World War II Europe in search of himself.

George Webber's story sounds incredibly similar to one Luke tells us in the 4th chapter of his gospel. Something draws us back home again and again for something in us believes that there in the place where we were nurtured in our earliest years we can discover our true selves. Yet Thomas Wolfe was right in a fundamental way. *You can't go home again.* God knows we try. When we lose our way in life's vast wilderness we often believe that if we can simply go back to the place we started we can begin again and do it differently this time around. But the reality is...once you leave you are never the same. You can return to the place you called home...but the rooms always seem smaller.

One wonders what motivated Jesus to go back home as he began his ministry. Perhaps in his humanity he was overwhelmed by the recent events of his life. Perhaps the weight of his baptism and the voice from heaven that proclaimed him as the Son of God was heavy on his mind. Or perhaps he was emotionally exhausted from his battle with evil in the wilderness and felt that he needed some time to recoup with Mom's home cooking. Or perhaps he felt that if he could simply go home where he had been nurtured in the faith and where he was known he could find a safe place from which to launch into his life's mission. For surely Jesus had to know that the message he preached and the life he lived would eventually result in a struggle that would lead to a cross.

Truthfully, we really do not know why Jesus felt compelled to come home. What we do know is that Jesus did come home. And on the Sabbath he went to worship. There he sat in the old family pew, third row back on the left. There in the synagogue Jesus sat among his relatives and his friends. Here perhaps more than anywhere else in his life Jesus was at home.

They asked Jesus to read the Scripture. The scroll handed to him was from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus read from Isaiah 61...a servant song which speaks of an *anointed one*, literally a Christ or Messiah, who is God's servant. This *anointed one* will bring to

reality the longing and the hope of the poor and the oppressed and the imprisoned...like the people who lived in his hometown. This anointed one, God's servant, will usher in a new age of Jubilee.

Isaiah is a familiar text, one Jesus' hearers know by heart, a scripture full of promise and hope. And when Jesus finishes reading he hands the scroll back to the attendant and says:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This is an incredible claim. And this is as ambitious a platform as you will ever hear. It is a bold mission that Jesus is outlining in this, his inaugural address as the Son of God. The poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed will be the focal point of Jesus' ministry. The heart of Jesus' message is unambiguously clear: Jesus is about good news for those who live perpetually on the margins of life. And for the moment he is the hometown hero. But Jesus tells them a story about Elijah and everything changes in an instant. We will save that for next week... AMEN