

There's No Place Like Home
Luke 4:14-30
18 July 2021
for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

Our second text comes from Luke's gospel, chapter 4, verses 14-30. Listen again for the word of the Lord:

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' ²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now I can admit that our memories might be hazed over with nostalgia, but I can tell you with absolute certainty that there was no one more famous, no one more sought after, than the McDill grandchildren leaving the Due West ARP church on Easter Sunday in 1994.

Who, you might ask, are the McDill grandchildren? Well I'm one of them, of course, along with my cousins on my mother's side. I don't expect you to know that but I promise the entire little town did. And on this particular Easter we were all at Due West Presbyterian. The town that watched my mother, her sisters and brother grow up, now saw the entire brood of grandchildren clustered — 15 minutes late — in a central pew in the old church. When the benediction was pronounced everyone jumped up and lurched toward the front steps. We were among the last to leave, but when we hit those steps it was as if the Kardashians just popped into LAX.

The parishioners still gathered greeted each grandchild with enthusiasm, pulling us aside to confirm our genealogy, tell a story about an aunt's childhood antics, about my mother's accidentally chlorine-bleached hair. Everyone knew us, everyone wanted to talk to us, a few kindly folks slipped candy in our hands when they pulled us in for hugs. It was transcendent. Due West was not my home but this was a proper homecoming.

Just imagine, if you will, if any one of us actually had a special skill. If we could *do* anything for anyone there. We were just a host of kids and this is how we were greeted. Imagine if I were a wonder-worker, healing the infirm, restoring life. Or a great orator, teaching in synagogues with the gravitas of a High Priest. Imagine, as I may have, that it was homecoming for a Messiah. I bet I'd get more than a story and a pocket full of Werther's.

Then again, perhaps something would be expected of me too. Perhaps a wonder worker would need to come work his wonders. Perhaps proximity to power would need to yield its benefit.

Word spread about Jesus. Everyone was talking about the Nazarene boy who'd spent forty days in the wilderness after his baptism, who was filled with the Spirit, who was moving from town to town racking up accolades and admiration. And now, word had spread, he was coming home.

All of his old playmates must have jostled for the closest. The women who had seen him grow and stumble and make Mary proud must have shone as they waited for him to take up the scroll. Easter 1994 in Due West has nothing on that day in Nazareth. Surely Jesus was saving his best for his homecoming.

In his retelling of the climactic moment, Luke slows the narrative, describes in detail what a faithful worshipper would have seen that sabbath day. Jesus arrives and stands up to read. One of his old neighbors hands him the scroll. He scans carefully until he has found just what he was looking for.

Isaiah. The prophet of exile, of hard truths and soaring hopes.

Carefully, Jesus reads the text. And in its explanation, the itinerant preacher who has been working wonders claims for himself the mantle of one anointed — a messianic title — marked by the Spirit to bring gospel to the poor, forgiveness to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and jubilee to all the land.

Jesus speaks and the congregation is spellbound. *Today*, he says, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”

“All spoke well of him,” Luke tells us. They were “amazed” at his eloquence and authority. Surely there was a widow in the congregation that day with failing eyesight, a man borne down under the weight of debt, a father whose son was held by the Roman army, a child in the grips of poverty.

I imagine them beginning to line up — arranging themselves according to need, pulling Jesus in for a hug, reminding him of their shared genealogy, of his aunt’s childhood antics, of just what he meant to poor ole Nazareth.

One problem: the sermon wasn’t over. Today, he said. Today, yes. But where?

Blink and you will miss it, the movement from amazement to anger. Jesus pivots, expanding Isaiah’s vision with an esoteric proverb and a mash-up of stories from the prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha. Elijah filled the belly of the Phoenician widow when he could have cared for the hungry in his own community. Elisha healed a Syrian general — a sworn enemy of Israel — when there were lepers in his own town.

Brimming with pride moment before, the mood in the synagogue begins to turn. A congregation becomes a coup.

The sermon was fine — good even — when it was good news for the Nazarenes. The hometown messiah come to heal our infirm, clear our vision, fill our bellies, and while he's at it, fill our bank accounts too!

Jesus' playmates and teachers could get on board with a utopian vision of a future that started at home. But Jesus cast his net further afield. The Nazarenes easily grasped the implications of Jesus' sermon. Before tending the need in his own synagogue Jesus was heading beyond the border — and he was giving them — infirmities and all — the opportunity to do the same.

They, his neighbors and friends, those who had fed him and clothed him and taught him to read, weren't first in line, their patronage wouldn't get them ahead. Freedom would come to Gentiles too — first, in fact.

They heard the good news — *today the Scripture is fulfilled* — but they could not understand how it could be good news for *them* that someone else go free, that someone else be healed, that someone else be released from bondage.

For the Nazarenes that day, the gospel news was a zero sum game. Grace won for *them* is lost for *us*. *Their* wound bandaged is a cut to *us*, *their* debts settled a devaluation of *our* accounts paid.

It is a familiar quandary, isn't it? Even these many years later. And as I so often do when confronted by the Spirit and the word, I wonder this morning where in the story I should place myself. The hometown boy made good? The Gentile outcast awaiting freedom? Or a Nazarene, a proper church-going type awe struck by a lovely message but scandalized by its implications?

Let's be honest: the shocking universality of the good news is fine in abstract. Who doesn't want economic justice for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed? But what if the immediacy of the gospel lays claim to something we think of as ours? What if "today" is too soon for our liking, trespasses our boundaries, borders, and beliefs; what if today doesn't mean *us first*.

“Today” is fine, if it’s good for me. And then when I feel well, settled, secure — sure, go on to the Gentiles, take the Good News down White Horse Road, or up to the Brox. Today, but maybe later today. Tomorrow’s fine too, come to think of it.

We await our portion of God’s mercy assuming it is a limited reserve, that it should be held with interest for the ones who show up and put in the work, who know the right people, and have climbed the right ladders. For *us* not *them*.

But what if the gospel is not an either/or? What if, in attending to the needs of the Gentile community Elijah lifted up his own community? What if, in curing the lepers beyond Galilee, Jesus began to make real the reconciling, liberating love of God not only for Jews but for all creation.

What if the well of mercy is a never ending spring, one that covers them and spills over to us?

What if in our doing the work of liberating others God also sets us free from our biases, free from our captivity, from our pursuits of other gods?

That is precisely what Emma Lazarus meant when she encouraged American Jews concerned about rising anti-Semitism stateside to first pay mind to pogroms in Eastern Europe, “Until we are all free,” she wrote, “we are none of us free.”

Grace hoarded only for us (presumed only for us) is not grace, it’s self-promotion, a benefit for the “in crowd,” not a gift freely given. And it is certainly not from God.

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” wrote Dr. King from the Birmingham jail, “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

The Nazarenes wanted to be first in line to get the best goods. But from the time of creation, the story of God is always a story of a movement outward — of grace where there was none, of transgressing boundaries, of a level plain of mercy, a light to the nations.

If they had the patience to listen, the hometown crowd would see that they did get first dibs, even if it wasn’t what they expected. They were the first to hear the good news

today, and the first to be given a chance to live into their calling *today*, the first given the opportunity to follow *today*.

Jesus' inaugural message in his hometown plainly laid out his agenda. Calling on Isaiah he identified five categories that would mark the work of his ministry, and by extension the ministry of *anyone who followed him, any community where the Spirit was present*. Today.

In Nazareth, in Due West, in Greenville —

Good news to the poor —
not just those poor in spirit,
but the dirt poor hunting for their next meal.

Forgiveness for prisoners — freedom
not just those captive in Roman cells,
but those captive in social cycles of poverty, addiction, and injustice.

Recovery of sight to the blind —
not just those who needed an eye doctor,
but to those who needed reoriented vision,
the ability to see beyond their noses and their needs
to the needs of the wider world.

Freedom to the oppressed —
not just widows and orphans,
but anyone anywhere crushed by the heel of injustice,
Cubans marching on the street,
Black Americans calling for equal dignity,
young Americans crying out for a environmental future.

And then ... then, jubilee. Not just to the Gentiles. Not just the Jews. God's liberation for God's creation. In streets and synagogues and sanctuaries all the same.

But here is the rub (then and now). It starts *out there*, and only in our following, in the going, in the pursuit of more justice, more freedom, more equality, does it manifest *in here*.

There's no place like home. But home is also *no place*. For disciples of Jesus home is wherever the Spirit is, wherever the Spirit calls, and the the Spirit is always up ahead, beyond our imaginings, beyond our places of comfort, *out there*.

The Gospel is not good news if it is only good news for us. The Gospel is good news when we who have seen the grace of God in the flesh follow it beyond ourselves into the world, and when, in the following we are transformed.

The joy of homecoming was not, that day in Due West, about what a 10 year old child could do for a congregation. It was a recognition of a mutuality born of a place but not settled there forever. That homecoming was full of the joy of sending, a community gathered to see what in this great wide world all these children would grow to do, and to take pride at having been a part of the story.

Jesus passed among the crowd. He rose above their anger and tribalism and got to work. And he asks us to do the same. To be and work for good news, release, restoration, freedom, and jubilee. For them first, yes, but also for us. The well is deep enough, the news good enough.

Will you dwell in the anger of a world beginning to change? Will you stew in presumption because they got the Gospel goods too? Or will you follow and find home?
Amen.