



“The Jesus We Thought We Knew”

Texts: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Luke 4: 14-30

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January 21, 2024

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

In reflecting back on my experience in Sunday School, I thought it might be fun to hear this familiar narrative of Jesus preaching at his hometown as a pre-teen might hear it and react to it. The substantive part of the passage - Jesus' quote from the prophet Isaiah, his own proclamation, and its meaning - would be mostly grown-up stuff. What really gets our attention is at the end, when the crowd gets all riled up and Jesus is run out of town, and they try to throw him off a cliff. What follows is even more exciting. It's not exactly clear what or how it happened. All the Bible says is that Jesus "passed through the midst of them and went on his way." As a child what I took that to mean was that Jesus somehow did a disappearing act. One minute he was about to be tossed off the edge of the cliff, and the next thing you know, he was walking away right in the middle of them like a ghost. How cool is that!

It might be kind of fun to spend some time with that part of the story; but we're not. Instead, we're going to examine the equally dramatic beginning that led to that cliffhanger conclusion and do some theological reflection on it.

It all begins as Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth after an indefinite period of time and read this from the book of Isaiah:

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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then Jesus quietly rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, and sat down. Every eye was directed on him. The silence in that synagogue was deafening; you could hear a pin drop. Then Jesus gave the punch line that announced the beginning of his ministry: *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*

What Jesus meant by that should have been quite clear to the people. He is the anointed one of God that Isaiah had prophesied. In him the poor find their vindicator and friend. Through him those imprisoned in darkness and in the shadow of death are set free. By his powerful action and compassion the blind, both physically and spiritually, see again. Through him, those who are oppressed by sin and sin's consequence are unchained.

"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Right there, in one line, Jesus summed up his purpose for coming into the world. But did anyone listen?

At first the people gathered there in the synagogue were quite impressed. Jesus read from Hebrew Scripture with authority and poise. What amazed them even more was their recognition that this is the same Jesus who is the son of Joseph the carpenter, not some educated scribe, or Levite. As far as they knew, he hadn't even gone to seminary.

But Jesus perceived something more sinister from their attempts at flattery. He said, "I know what you're thinking. You want to quote me the old saying, 'Heal yourself.' And you're wondering, *Why don't you do some of those miracles here that we've heard about you doing in Capernaum. Well, the problem is [Jesus went on] no prophet is accepted in his hometown.*"

That was only the teaser. The boom came down when Jesus told them that truth is often revealed in Scripture by outsiders who eventually are later seen as models of faith in Israelite history.

To be more specific, Jesus recalled two examples from the lives of two of the most respected prophets of Israel - Elijah and Elisha - who reached beyond the people of Israel to welcome those who represented the marginalized and despised.

Elijah went to the poor widow of Zarephath in Sidon who during a famine over the whole land, gave the last of what she had to feed Elijah and herself and thereby received the blessing of God. Elisha healed the Syrian general Naaman who was initially proud and reluctant to follow the prophet's instructions, but eventually did what he was told. With a little encouragement from his Israelite servant, Naaman washed in the Jordan and was healed.

Then Jesus further drove his point home. There were, in fact, many widows and lepers to choose from among the Jews in Israel to heal or restore, even from the prophets' own hometowns, but none of them, not one, received a miracle.

Well, the people in the synagogue were not stupid. They knew their Scripture, and they could put two and two together from what Jesus was saying about them, and they didn't like it at all. Jesus was equating them with those who were either unreceptive or openly resistant to what the prophets were saying back in the time of Elijah and Elisha. In fact, so far, the only people who were receptive to Jesus' teaching or open to his healing powers were those who never heard of him or knew anything about his background or upbringing.

Suddenly the Jesus that the folks in Nazareth thought they knew turns out to be some upstart self-proclaimed prophet. The pride they had of their identification with Jesus as the carpenter's son suddenly turns to resentful indignation. Jesus had the audacity to sit

among them and suggest that they would NOT be vessels of God's unfolding gospel. They were to have no part in it. The insiders suddenly become outsiders.

Well, they had had about enough. They plug their ears, and they turn red with rage. To use a phrase that was made famous in the movie *Network*, they were "mad as hell and they weren't going to take it anymore." They were so angry that, well, I already told you what happened after that.

All of this perhaps should make us all wonder as did the people of Nazareth - who is this Jesus we thought we knew. Who is this Jesus we the church worship and serve? I want to lead into the answer to that question with my own story.

As some of you know, I grew up in Grand Rapids among the western Michigan Dutch and attended and received my religious education within the Christian Reformed Church. I attended CRC-branded Christian schools and enrolled in Calvin College. It was in college, however, that I began to drift away from the church of my upbringing.

Upon graduation, I escaped Grand Rapids and eventually found myself in the Boston area living hand to mouth and having the time of my life. I became part of a congregation called Old Cambridge Baptist Church, a liberal American Baptist congregation. My separation from my Christian Reformed roots was well under way. Then came an invitation to gather at a conference that explored some exciting new theological ground within the Reformed tradition. Many who attended were members and leaders within the CRC. Despite some initial reservations, I was kind of intrigued and decided to drive up to Niagara, New York.

I don't recall much about the conference itself, but I was apparently impressed enough with it to stay for the duration. That is, until the final worship service that concluded the gathering. All through that service a sense of dis-ease or disquiet began to come over me. I felt alone amidst this gathering of believers.

Finally, during the last hymn, a sense of recognition along with panic swept over me. I bolted from my seat, ran down the center aisle and didn't stop until I reached my tent. It was there and then, that I burst into unrelenting tears. I had suddenly realized that these were not my people anymore. The church that had nurtured me in the faith, the faith of my fathers and mothers of generations before became almost unrecognizable to me now. I couldn't tell if they were moving away from me, or if it was the other way around. But it didn't matter. I was no longer one of them. My tears were tears of grief and loss of a rich heritage that no longer fit who I was and what I was becoming.

I was realizing that the body of Jesus Christ was bigger than white folk with Dutch names and accents. In Boston it included Baptists and Methodists, Pentecostals and Episcopalians, Catholics and Orthodox. It included blacks and whites, Africans, and Asians.

I drove back to Boston affirming my new ecumenical Christian identity. It was much later that I came to further recognize that in some cosmic way the Body of Christ includes people of other faiths as well.

A few years after that cataclysmic incident in Niagara, New York, I entered seminary and upon completion was ordained in the United Church of Christ. Not long after that I intentionally switched to the PCUSA which was a conscious reaffirmation of my Reformed roots. Finally, I felt at home again in the church.

I have told this story to many people over the years, and I imagine many of you have similar stories to tell. And maybe like me you have come to recognize that what happened to us is not something that should take place once in a lifetime. Our Christian pilgrimage should be the kind of practice in which Jesus reveals himself to us in new ways every day.

There is a sense in which we are kind of like snakes that seasonally shed their old skin and put on new skin. I suppose I could have chosen another metaphor which would have worked just as well. But the point is we are changing all the time. As Frederick Buechner tells us, we are changing according to how God speaks to us through the events of our lives.

Like the people in Jesus' hometown, we tend to form an image of Jesus that is familiar and comfortable. Then one day we discover that God is unfolding new narratives in the strangest places, even in the lives of outsiders to the community of faith. One author calls them "edge people in edge places." They are known in many different guises. You know who they are in this community. They are people who have been ostracized in their schools or workplaces because they look differently or love differently; people of a different political persuasion; young women and men trying to find their way in this crazy, fast-paced world; refugees, both foreign and domestic, fleeing unspeakable oppression. These are the edge people; they are God's people, and they have stories to tell.

Change - aka transformation - can be very unsettling. Just ask the people of Nazareth. Jesus' audience there opted for the familiar and often so do you and me. It becomes duplicitous when our resistance to change becomes a protection of what we think of as God's interests which are really nothing more than our own, or when we want to safeguard what we have and or what has always been. But Jesus shows us a better way, a more enriching way.

It is a wonderful irony that when we finally realize that God's ever fresh gospel in Jesus Christ is unfolding in some of the most ordinary and peculiar places - when we see that God is acting outside of our self-imposed walls, or those imposed upon us - we become free to be God's people in Christ - free to do what we are called to do as the church in the world.

The Jesus we thought we once knew we now recognize afresh every day with unfiltered eyes and open hearts - the Jesus of the cross and the resurrection. But unlike the folks in Nazareth who when faced with the truth rushed to throw Jesus off the cliff, we run to embrace him. And unlike the end of that story, Jesus will not "pass through the midst of us and be on his way." Jesus will be with us a remain with us always to comfort and challenge. So may it be.