

Luke 4:14-21
January 23, 2022

The concept of, “hometown,” is not as tight for me as it might otherwise have been, as maybe it was for my father, whose hometown was McAlester, Oklahoma. For one thing, I was raised in two places, St. Ann, and then Bridgeton, Missouri, which are both suburbs of St. Louis. St. Louis is about twenty miles away, and is a place I have never lived, though when people ask, I often tell them that I am from there.

Just having two hometowns and a large city makes my notion of what, “hometown,” means weaker. I grew up on the south side, and then the west side of the airport in northwest St. Louis County. The second neighborhood, on the west side, was taken by eminent domain about twenty years ago, to provide space for an unnecessary airport expansion, a runway that has never been used because air traffic declined after 9/11 and the demise of TWA.

One has heard the line, “you can never go back.” Most of the time it is not true. In the sense that one’s hometown never leaves the heart, and as long as it is physically there, one can always return, if only for a visit. But I never can. What was there is gone; the house, the schools, the churches, the parks, the businesses; even the people are all somewhere else.

The Gospels agree that the hometown of Jesus was Nazareth, in the district of Galilee, not far from the sea that goes by the same name, in what had been at one time Northern Israel, even though Jesus was Judean, from what had been Southern Israel. He was raised in the Roman world, not far from a much larger city called Sepphoris. And, apparently, he also had two hometowns, because by the time he was an adult his family seems to have moved to Capernaum, on the sea.

And he suffered one of the senses that one can almost never go back. He became the leader of a movement with a modest amount of notoriety. In one’s hometown, a person will always be the child that people knew in their youth. It seems that human beings have the ability to keep ordinary people in the category of the ordinary even when they have gone on to become extraordinary somewhere else, at least until something has happened to make them proud, and then we make an idol out of them, and then they might put their name on a sign at the edge of town.

The text from Luke’s gospel catches Jesus at just the moment at which, after his baptism, and time of testing out in the desert, he comes home as an adult to preach in the synagogue on a Saturday morning. I am not sure if they had anything like a lectionary to prescribe for them which texts to read each week, or if they did, it seems unclear that Jesus followed it. What they handed to him was the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and then he found the place in the 61st chapter where it is written;

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he told them that this scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. By the end of the sequence, the people were so furious with Jesus that they drove him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff. More important than the idea that Jesus became someone not welcome in the place of his youth, is the significance of that which he saw himself called to proclaim:

“The year of the Lord’s favor,” he called it,
“Good news to the poor
Freedom for the captives
Recovery of sight for the blind
Release . . . for the oppressed.”

Like it or not, even after all the changes that have occurred these 2,000 since Jesus came out preaching, this message is still relevant, still in need of being proclaimed, and fulfilled. In some ways it has been accomplished, for many people, but for some it is still a future hope; we still have poverty, imprisonment, oppression, various kinds of unfairnesses that are from time-to-time unbearable. Whatever Jesus said had been fulfilled in their hearing, has been fulfilled in ours, it has not played itself out yet.

How do we respond, given the circumstances, with all the hometowns that have come and gone since then? We have a choice between living backwards to the time before the good news was spoken, or to some kind of golden age to which we attempt to return; or to live by faith towards the hope of the fulfillment of which Jesus spoke. There may be a tragic quality to it all, knowing what happened to Jesus at the end of his life, but it turns out to be a triumphant tragedy, with a staying power that justifies our faith in it, calls us to faithful living; you know the list: integrity, honesty, goodness, compassion, kindness and forgiveness; faith and love, joy and hope.

Believe in that gospel, it was fulfilled in their hearing all those years ago in Nazareth. It remains fulfilled now, sealed by his death, confirmed by his resurrection, and sustained by the presence of the spirit.

Prayer

Almighty God, we approach this time of prayer in the firm conviction of your providential love for every person and confidence in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Bless these quiet moments of worship, of thanksgiving and praise, of sincere faith.

Sisters and brothers,
let us lift our hearts in faith
to the one who hears all prayers
and holds close all those in need.
Let us offer now our petitions and confessions:

Holy God, you gather the whole universe
into your presence and continually reveal your Son as our Savior. Bring healing to all
wounds,
make whole all that is broken,
speak truth to all illusion,
and shed light in every darkness,
that all creation will see your glory and know your Christ. Join me now in the Lord's
Prayer

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