

## Jesus Visits Nazareth July 19, 2020

Today's Bible lesson is taken from Mark 6. Jesus, after beginning his ministry, returned to his home town of Nazareth. There are parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. As the lesson book tells us, Mark was the first of the four canonical gospels to be written (at least in its current form). Both Luke and Matthew are derived from Mark, taking material from Mark as well as from other sources for their accounts. The gospel writer Mark believed to be the John Mark first mentioned in Acts 12:12. John is his Jewish name and Mark is his Greek name. Increasingly, he came to be referred to by his Greek name, just as Saul became Paul. The early church met in his mother Mary's house in Jerusalem. Later Mark was with Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. He went with them on what is called their "First Missionary Journey" as far as Perga, but then returned to Jerusalem. Later, from Antioch, he traveled with Barnabas to Cyprus. Paul writes of "Mark the Cousin of Barnabas," in three epistles, who he regarded as a co-worker, presumably this same Mark.

Early church tradition says that Mark was with Peter in Rome. He may have written the gospel there, or possibly later in Alexandria. Bishop Papias wrote (c. 140 A.D.):

"This also the presbyter used to say: 'Mark, indeed, who became the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, as far as he remembered them, the things said or done by the Lord, but not however in order.' For he [Mark] had neither heard the Lord nor had been his personal follower, but at a later stage, as I said, he had followed Peter, who used to adapt the teachings to the needs of the moment, but not as though he was drawing up a connected account of the oracles of the Lord: so Mark committed no error in writing certain matters just as he remembered them. For he had only one object in view, namely to leave out nothing of the things which he had heard, and to include no false statement among them."

I think this is an interesting perspective on Mark's, and the other, gospels. They were not written as historical accounts, but so that men (and women) might believe. It is interesting that Mark's favorite word seems to be "immediately." The gospel is immediate, almost terse, and relatively short. The shorter it was, the more copies could be made, and the wider it could be distributed. I get that sense – an urgency to the message. Quite possibly Mark was written in the 60's A.D., in the days before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Writing later, Matthew and Luke included additional material each of them had. (I should also mention that there seems to have been a "secret" version of Mark that included some additional material, including a "raising of the dead" account parallel to the story of Lazarus in John. There is some thought that our modern version of Mark includes some material from that version.)

So, coming to our focus today on Jesus' return to Nazareth, Mark's account is relatively brief. He does not report Jesus' message at his home town synagogue. Matthew's account is almost identical. Luke adds to the story Jesus' reading from the prophet Isaiah, and his subsequent remarks. All three accounts report the rejection, even contempt, poured out on Jesus by those who had known him best prior to the beginning of his ministry. The only words of Jesus in Mark (Mark 6:4) are: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

I don't know what it would be like to return to the city where I grew up and speak to people I knew back then. Family, yes, but those others? Let's just say that I was not well regarded when I was young. I was younger than most in my grade, and immature. I would have no expectation that anyone from back then could have any respect for me, whatever I may have done since.

I think that's what Jesus met. Notwithstanding the story of Jesus in the temple at age 12, nobody in Nazareth thought he was anything special. After all, the story at age 12 took place in far-away Jerusalem. What the friends of Joseph and Mary would have remembered most was that Joseph, Mary and their family had to return to Jerusalem because that oldest son of theirs, Jesus, had missed departing with them. How troublesome! Since then he has seemed to be entirely ordinary, until he left his family to attend that mystic in the wilderness near Jericho. As the lesson writer conveys, there's a sense of, "Who does he think he is?" in the reaction of the people of Nazareth to Jesus.

The limitation of Mark's account is that we don't know what Jesus said to them. We don't know the "wisdom" that they are "taking offense" at. In Mark's gospel, it also seems clear that this rejection may be not just from the people of the town, but even from Jesus's own family. Earlier in Mark 3 we read in verse 21:

**21 "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."**

The scribes were saying that Jesus was possessed by the ruler of demons. His family seems to have wondered. Later in verse 31:

**31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." 33 And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."**

Jesus seems to be rejected by everybody who had known him before. He is followed by those who heard his message without the prejudice of having known him before. They have seen miraculous acts of healing, and heard his Wisdom. They see what is, not what was before.

In Luke's account, we have more details. By the time Jesus comes to Nazareth, stories have reached his home town about his miracles and his words of wisdom. The people in Nazareth no doubt have a hard time believing it. They may also be puzzled that he has not returned to do miracles there in Nazareth. If he is indeed the Jesus of Nazareth, shouldn't he be granting the benefits of his healing powers to those in his own town? Has he forgotten where he came from? You can figure that, when Jesus finally did come to Nazareth, there was a crowd to see him.

Luke has Jesus's appearance in Nazareth early in his ministry, just after the Temptations. We know from Papias's comments that we cannot be sure of the chronology, as Luke is at least in part derived from Mark. In Luke, at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah verses 61:1-2a.

**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.”**

(Note: This doesn't read exactly as our Isaiah 61:1-2a, because our current translation of Isaiah is translated directly from the Hebrew. The words in Luke are taken from the Septuagint, a translation of Hebrew to Greek, which then is translated into English. There are some discrepancies among sources. For example, “recovery of sight to the blind” is not in our current Isaiah 61:1.)

What is evident to us, and would have been evident to the people of Nazareth, is that Jesus is identifying himself with the Servant of the Lord of Isaiah. The words, “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,” imply a messianic mission. Think of some nondescript person you knew from your youth. Suppose you heard on TV that the person was now a famous philosopher or commentator on the human condition, or such. Wouldn't you have doubts? You'd think, “Show me! I won't believe it's really him unless I see it myself!” Just so, here Jesus has just made his proclamation. But where is the “Show us!” This is where things turned ugly. Jesus continues:

**23 He said to them, Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard that you did at Capernaum’.” 24 And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is**

**accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But the truth is there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a poor widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." (Luke 4: 23-27)**

How do expectations of a "Hero" and a "Hometown Hero" differ? The "Hero" part says, "does great things." If the hero is a "hometown hero," he's expected to do something of benefit for the home town, though. Surely he remembers where he's from! More than likely he grew up with a sense of promise, and eventually rose on the acclaim of those home town folks who knew him, and likely promoted him. And, in return, the home town benefits. It's sort of transactional. He owes it to his supporters. If the context is politics (which it often is), the hero wins the election with the support of various individuals and interests, then goes off to the capitol where he is expected to act in ways to benefit the home town. "Bring home the pork," is an expression we hear. Often, very successful politicians bring benefits back to their home towns in the form of federal offices moved there, development grants, construction projects, and the appointment of other hometown notables to offices. It's the way of the world.

Jesus, in effect, announced that he was not that kind of hometown hero. When you read further in Isaiah about the Servant of the Lord, you find (Isaiah 53:1-3):

**1 Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.**

This passage pretty well describes Jesus as he has seemed to his friends and family in Nazareth. Then he tells them that it is not his purpose, God's purpose, to be a source of benefits for his home town. The references to Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17:8-24) and Elisha and Naaman (II Kings 5:1-14) make that clear. They are outraged. In Luke's gospel, the crowd even seeks to throw him off the brow of the hill to kill him.

The idea that someone who has made good owes to those who were in his family, or colleagues or mentors in his youth, is pervasive. We see it today. If someone wins the lottery, they immediately find they have lots of friends, and hear from long lost cousins. Indeed, entire enterprises depend on this. Wilkes University has an "Advancement" department which attempts to stay in touch with successful graduates and solicit money

from them. With a sufficiently large “naming” gift you can even have a building or something else named after you. The message commonly given is that you really do owe it to the institution, or the home town, or the family members, for all they did to help you be a success. It’s a matter of reciprocity, of showing appreciation. But, that’s not the way God works. Or, rather, it’s not the way we can work God.

Jesus brought God’s Word into the world in a new way. His success at doing so was God’s doing. Not the doing of his pals back in Nazareth. Not even because of his family, although surely Mary and Joseph had much to do with his growth to maturity. Jesus, and God, did not “owe” anybody. In like manner, Jesus did not “owe” anybody for his wisdom and understanding. Look at Matthew chapters 5-7, a sample of Jesus’s teachings collected as “The Sermon on the Mount.” We repeatedly hear Jesus say, “You have heard that it was said, ...” and he would quote a principle of the Law. Then he would say, “I say to you that...” and he would explain a better understanding of how to live in obedience to God’s will, in a way that goes beyond the literal law. He does this in Matthew successively for murder and anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, love and hatred, and giving of alms. He does this without quoting previous famous rabbis or teachers. The crowds were “astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” The people of Nazareth likewise were astounded, but could not accept what Jesus said because of who he was, “the son of Mary,” the man who had been a mere carpenter, or son of a carpenter, among them. To rephrase an expression Jesus used often, “They did not have ears to hear.”

We, likewise, have to guard against our own vulnerabilities. What new wisdom might we be rejecting because of our background, that we “know too much” to consider? As we think about this, remember, there is hope. We can make mistakes, but later come to understand things better. Jesus’s brothers, who rejected him early in his ministry, became followers later. James, the brother of Jesus, was an important figure in the early Church in Jerusalem, as we can read in Acts. The book of James is nominally his. The book of “Jude” is from another brother. We know that, even at the cross, Mary was present. Tradition says that she was cared for by the apostle John in Ephesus later. Most dramatically, the young rabbi Saul turned from being a persecutor of early Christians to an energetic and prolific evangelist. People can change; wisdom can be found by those who seek. Doors can be opened. God reaches out to us. And little boys can become grown men.

Prayer: *“Holy One, help us to find ourselves in the Gospel story, in our belief and in our disbelief. Amen.”*