



**“Back in His Hometown”**

**Scripture – Mark 6:1-13**

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, July 7, 2024**

Certain cities conjure up images in our minds. Try these on: Paris, Miami, Venice. And then, what of Hazard, Kentucky; Bobo, Mississippi.

Some cities are glamorous destinations that lure travelers from around the globe; other places become the jokes of late-night television. Further, there are towns that acquire a reputation they would love to shed because something terrible happened there. Merely to mention the name is to invoke ugly images: Dachau; Chernobyl; Hiroshima; Gaza.

We do not know how or why, but in ancient times, Nazareth was one of those communities that became ashamed of its name. In the Gospel of John, Philip encourages Nathanael to become a disciple of Jesus, and Nathanael’s response is: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Today, Nazareth is the largest city in the northern part of Israel, home to more than 80,000 Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim. It’s a bustling city with traffic-filled streets. However, at the time of Jesus, Nazareth was a pint-sized village of only 300, with olive trees, a donkey operated oil press, and a few dozen sheep.

We are not sure why people in the ancient world would make such a caustic remark at the mere mention of the town’s name, but one scholar ventures a guess. He says, “Most likely it was not because of anything that had happened there. Indeed, it might have been because nothing ever happened there. Nazareth produced no kings, no generals, no scholars, no prophets...nothing worth noting. ‘So, you say you’re from Nazareth. Ha! Can anything good come out of Nazareth. The laughter burned in their ears.’”<sup>1</sup>

So, imagine how it was for the people of Nazareth when the buzz began to spread about one of the young men from their hometown. Jesus had been dazzling people in several communities with his compelling insights into the character of God, with his fervent message of compassion and justice for all people, and with his remarkable healing touch that was spawning health and wholeness.

We can picture this scene. Everyone in Nazareth was fond of the son of Mary and Joseph. He was a nice child who was a favorite of the other kids. In his teen years he had worked as a carpenter and stone mason with his father and showed promise as a craftsman. But at some point, he struck out on his own and departed the community.

At the outset of today's passage, he has been away for at least a dozen years. However, in the past few months, word has trickled back about Jesus. He has been turning heads with his wisdom and his ability to cure people's maladies.

So, after wowing people in other places, Jesus treks back to the community where he was raised. On the day he speaks in the synagogue, it is standing room only.

As he begins to talk, his insights immediately seize everyone's attention. All eyes are riveted on him, and the room falls silent to any noise except the charismatic voice of Jesus. People are struck by the depth of his wisdom. I can imagine some of the leaders of the community swelling with pride as they visualize the new sign they will post at the city limits: "Welcome to Nazareth, the Proud Hometown of Jesus."

However, the shining moment is short-lived. The townspeople turn on him. Someone – maybe a childhood friend who was envious of Jesus for what he has become – says, "Wait a minute. Isn't this Jesus, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us? We know this family. Jesus is a common laborer. Our passage says, "And the people took offense at him."

William Willimon says that a friend of his had the opportunity to be in the presence of the Dali Lama. His friend said, "When his Holiness speaks, everyone in the room becomes quiet, serene and peaceful." Well, that is not what happened when Jesus addressed the hometown crowd. Our passage says that "People took offense at him."

Rather than embracing his riveting insights, they became defensive. A colleague writes, "From one point of view, we can read it as a teaching tale: you can't go home again. You can't fit back into the role you once had in a family system. You can't climb back into the cocoon. However, growing in faith means outgrowing (what you once were) ...it means giving up the comfort of familiarity;"<sup>2</sup> It means being open to new insights and the possibility that a person has grown beyond the superficial bounds we have placed on them.

All of us tend to see what we expect to see. If we see our daughter as the child who was constantly making mistakes, we will likely highlight every misstep she makes as an adult. If we fear people of another race or culture, we will foster prejudice in our minds that can turn our words into poison.

Alternatively, if we believe someone to be wise or compassionate, we anticipate receiving a gift when we are in her presence. We often see what we expect to see, which can be limiting or it can be illuminating. The expectations of the people of Nazareth prevented them from embracing Jesus as the one in whom God's Spirit uniquely dwelt.

Scholar Debie Thomas writes that the people of Nazareth were basically saying: "We know exactly where you come from boy! Don't get too big for your britches! Remember your place! (And in some) disturbing

way, the people's small-mindedness, their lack of trust, and their inability to embrace a new facet of Jesus's life and mission, kept them in spiritual poverty...They missed the presence of God in their midst."<sup>3</sup>

Our text indicates that our expectations can be stifling. We can even block the flow of God's Spirit. Mark declares that by seeing Jesus as nothing exceptional, the people of Nazareth become a barrier to what Jesus can accomplish. Their skepticism not only prevented them from embracing the one in whom God was being revealed, it even diminished the power of Jesus. I suspect most of us would like to duck that weighty responsibility. We don't want to be a barrier to what God can achieve.

Our passage prompts us to ask ourselves a few soul-searching questions: Are there people in my life whose growth I inhibit? Do I become anxious or jealous of others who grow and change? Am I so comfortable with what is familiar, that I inhibit my own transformation?

Maligned and dismissed by the people of Nazareth, what does Jesus do? Burst into anger? Withdraw into depression? No. He simply moves on to more fertile territory. Our text says that he calls together his 12 disciples and gives them instructions. He places them in pairs and orders them to travel light. And he means light! No suitcases, no carry-on bag. They are not even allowed an extra pair of shoes. They are to travel with nothing but the clothes they are wearing. Why? Because he wants his disciples to be totally dependent on the hospitality of others. And to make certain that when they reach a town they do not shop around for the best digs, Jesus says to stay in the first home that welcomes you. Perhaps he is driving home the point that we are dependent on one another for our well-being, and it is in the bonds we form that we satisfy yearnings of the heart.

With their marching orders in hand, the disciples help people turn their lives in the direction of God, they cast out demonic spirits, and they heal. Jesus sends out 12 ordinary men to do the work of God. It is the way God works in the world. Rather than telling us to step aside while God performs supernatural feats, God calls ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.

A few years ago, at Emory University's commencement exercises, honorary degrees were being awarded and the recipients made the requisite speeches. The students chatted through most of the ceremony. However, there was one moment when everyone became still. "It was when a man named Hugh Thompson spoke. He was the least educated person on the platform...He never finished college, choosing instead to enlist in the Army, where he became a helicopter pilot."

"On March 16, 1968, he was flying a routine patrol in Vietnam when he happened to fly over the village of Mai Lai just as American troops, under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, were slaughtering dozens of unarmed villagers – old men, women, and children. Thompson set his helicopter down between the troops and the remaining civilians. He ordered his door-gunner to train the helicopter guns on the American soldiers, and he ordered the soldiers to stop killing the villagers...Hugh Thompson's actions almost resulted in him being court-martialed, but he saved the lives of dozens of people. It was thirty years before the Army awarded him the Soldier's Medal."

"As he stood at the microphone for Emory's commencement, the rowdy student body grew still...Thompson talked about his faith. Speaking of what his parents taught him as a child he said, "They taught me, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' The students were amazed at these

“words of Jesus, words from Sunday school and worship. When Thompson finished, they leapt to their feet and gave him a standing ovation.”<sup>4</sup>

God sends us on the same mission as the first disciples. We are to demonstrate to others a life that is turned in the direction of God – one that loves our neighbor as ourselves. We are to combat the demonic spirits in our world – racism, violence, greed, lust, envy, oppression, neglect...the list is long. And we are to be healing agents, praying for the ill, visiting the lonely, and reconciling relationships.

God calls us. God challenges us. God sends us into our wounded world, because God knows that what we can accomplish is extraordinary. And I mean you!

#### NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, “God’s Saving Power,” in *Pulpit Resource*, January-March, 2004, p.23.
2. Marilyn McEntyre, “The Disciples Want to Know Who Jesus Is. The People from His Hometown Do Not,” *The Christian Century*, July 2024.
3. Debie Thomas, “Origin Stories,” July 1, 2018.
4. Tom Long, *Pulpit Resources* 32 (January-March 2004), p. 39.

### **Great Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Eternal God, we give you thanks for the breath of life. You create us in your image, embrace us as your children, and grant us the freedom to live abundant lives. Some days we are mindful of the blessings that make us rich – families who love us when we are at our best and when we are at our worst; friends that support us when life is difficult and celebrate with us when life is good; children who surprise us with their fresh ways of seeing and bring us happiness with their uncalculating love. But Lord, there are other days when we forget the gifts of life. On these days, our thoughts are consumed by the armed conflicts that rob people of their lives, greed that wrecks the environment, cynicism that makes us callous, and suffering that leads to despair.

Gracious God, when we feel beaten down, you shore up our strength; when we face struggles, you bolster our courage; and when a better day seems unlikely, you give us reason to keep forging ahead.

God of Majesty, as we prepare to share the Lord’s supper, help us to be fully present in this moment. Help us to set aside any worry or distraction that seeks to rob us of this special time when past, present, and future unite. Enable us to focus on our bond with you and our connection with one another. Forgive our shortcomings, heal the wounds we have caused others, and transform us into people who are more Christ-like. As we eat this bread and drink this cup, fill us with joy and compassion, inspire us to be grateful and considerate, and create in us an insatiable hunger for justice and peace. Jesus taught us that the way to live is to love, and so we offer ourselves to you with gratitude as we unite our voices in the universal prayer, he taught us to pray, saying, **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**