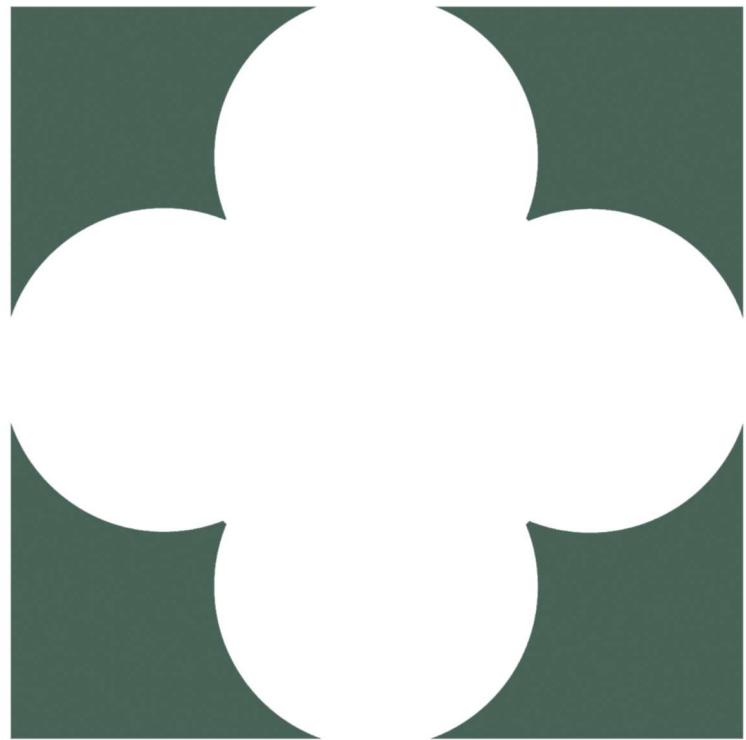


There's No Place Like Home

Rev. Anita Peebles



seattle first baptist

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Luke 4:16-27

There's no place like home, is there? Well, for Dorothy and her trusty little dog Toto, they really wanted to be in Kansas, back with Auntie Em. No place like home, there's no place like home. And that's relatable sometimes, especially as we go through times of transition... it's normal to experience the longing to go back to what was, the deep desire for the familiar, the urge to want to have everything as it has been. But for others of us, going back home is not what we expect, and when something in the home ecosystem has shifted, it can be hard to accept that things are not the way they were.

A fellow clergy woman, Alyssa Augustson, shared this observation with me: "when baby birds are in the nest, we all know how they hold their mouths open waiting for momma to bring food. When they get to be teenagers and get pushed out of the nest, they fly and find food on their own. Watching the scraggly teenage cardinals at the feeder one spring, I witnessed them pecking through the seeds only to stop and hop around with their mouths open when momma bird showed up at the feeder. Leaving the nest allows us to grow. Returning home brings expectations that one is the same or has changed in certain ways, also the temptation for the one returning to revert back to old ways of being."

I think that's a bit of what's going on in this Scripture passage. Jesus visits his hometown, the town where Dr. Wilda Gafney says he was "nurtured and fed." His most immediate recent experiences were being baptized by John in the Jordan, blessed by the Holy Spirit, tempted by earthly power and greatness in the wilderness, and calling his disciples. Then, he's back in Nazareth, where his mother and siblings probably still live. But instead of being welcomed with open arms by the community that raised him, his visit turns more contentious.

Fledgling Jesus, aged 30, has finally left the nest and in this scripture passage we meet him in the process of defining his identity and his purpose in the world. But, when he comes back to Nazareth, to the people who nurtured him and his family, who probably saw him playing in the street with his cousins, who taught him about the Scriptures and instilled in him the core teachings of Judaism at that time... to them, he is a Hometown Boy. "Isn't that Joseph's son?" "Oh yeah, the carpenter's kid?" "Wow, how he's grown into a man! I remember when he used to chase sticks with my kids after school."

Maybe Jesus thought, “there’s no place like home,” but then when he gets there he doesn’t quite fit in anymore. He returns as a man to the synagogue of his youth, where he was spiritually formed in the tradition of study and worship, as we read about in his teen years. In our story today, Jesus participates in the tradition of reading from the scriptures. Today, the reading is from the prophet Isaiah, words written in a Hebrew context in about the 8th or 9th century BCE, and handed down through prophetic literature in the life of the Jewish worshipping community. I bet Jesus even knew these words by heart because of the very people sitting around him in that synagogue who taught him! The words were centuries old by the time Jesus read them, resonating in the time of Roman empirical control just as they resonated in the time of Hebrew exile in Babylon. And today, as we receive Isaiah’s words through Jesus, they resonate in our context in one of the wealthiest cities in the wealthiest country on the planet.

By reading these well-known words of a prophet from the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus was shaping a narrative about his identity and mission. I imagine that as he read, he sensed some reaction in the gathered community as they listened. Dr. Gafney tells us, “In this Gospel Jesus claims the title of Liberator that the scriptures bestow on God. In his mouth these ancient words are heard *as though they are new*; in them the people find grace and simply marvel at them on his tongue. Yet he is a hometown boy who has gone off and made a name for himself and they are quick to put him in his place, naming Joseph as his father and likely invoking the scandal of his questionable parentage, perhaps in front of his mother or other relatives. Jesus cuts through the subtle dig to name the issue: familiarity breeds contempt for prophets as much as for anyone else. He tells a hard truth: your gifts may not be accepted, welcome, or lauded by the folk who should be in your corner. In doing so, he teaches that God will go right on doing her good work no matter what anyone thinks of her messenger, including to folk who were not thought worthy.”

We have to be careful with any texts about Jesus and his Jewish context. Tim reminded us of this just last Sunday, as he called us to remember that Jesus was Jewish. You may have noticed that some among us laughed. Maybe you weren’t one of them. Maybe you were. I don’t believe anyone laughed because they were upset about the claim about Jesus’ ethnic and

religious identity. But laughter clearly wasn't the expected reaction because Tim paused and said, "No, really, I'm serious."

And some of us were surprised and confused and saddened to hear laughter in response to this heartfelt reminder. In a time when antisemitism is on the rise in this country, Tim reminded us that we as Christians need to continuously rededicate ourselves to solidarity with our Jewish siblings. Because there have been so many, really, *countless* times when Christians dismissed Jesus' Jewish identity, today solidarity includes understanding Jesus' Jewish faith and reckoning with the history of Christian antisemitism.

We have an opportunity to do part of this work today as we consider this passage in Luke's gospel. So often Christians can give into "supersessionist" thought, the idea that everything that Jesus did and said was new and better than what came before, that his preaching to the Gentiles was worth more than his ministry among his people. That line of thinking is dangerous, because it contributes to a dynamic that places Christians over and above Jewish tradition. Sometimes this looks like interpreting Jewish people in the Christian scriptures as xenophobic, and being against Jesus ministering with Gentiles.

Jewish New Testament scholar Dr. Amy-Jill Levine says, "Such conclusions misread Jewish history. Jews in general had positive relations with Gentiles, as witnessed by the court of the Gentiles in the Jerusalem Temple, gentiles as patrons of synagogues (7.1-10), and Gentiles as God-fearers (Acts 10). They also expected the redemption of righteous Gentiles, who would come streaming to Zion, as Zech 8:23 states...the rejection of Jesus is not prompted by xenophobia; it is prompted by Jesus' refusal to provide his hometown with messianic blessings." The people of Nazareth had heard that Jesus was sharing his gifts in places like Capernaum, and so they wondered what he was up to in their town, *in his hometown!*

I wonder if some thought, "after all we've done for him, why won't he bless us?" or if others thought, "really? He's not that special-I changed his diapers!" I wonder if there was some skepticism simply because they knew him too well, they knew about his dubious parentage, they knew how he behaved in school, they wanted to treat him just like Mary and Joseph's son from down the road. I wonder if they just didn't know what to do with a guy they've

known all his life, who now is quoting Scripture back at them telling them to do more to combat oppression.

As with many biblical stories, I find this feeling relatable, and I wonder if you can relate to it, too. There's a specific kind of grief when you feel that someone should understand you, but they don't. I wonder if Jesus felt that about the community that raised him. Dr. Wil Gafney writes about the complexity of encountering people who should be in your corner but who are not, who cut you down or dismiss your work when they should be cheering you on, people who you thought would get your mission but they don't. There's sadness, hurt, betrayal, worry, and the echoing choruses of "what if they got it?" "what if they got *me*?"

And I wonder if that community felt the same way about Jesus. "He knows us, he knows that we value these prophetic words, why is he preaching them back to us?" "He grew up here, he knows that we care for the widow and the orphan, that we advocate for justice?" "Why doesn't he remember all those good things we've done before, why is he telling us to do what we've been doing for years?"

I wonder if Jesus and his family and his community and his disciples were all doing that heart-aching work of reassessing their relationships and redrawing their expectations of each other. I know I can relate to having that feeling about a community I've been a part of before; can you relate to that feeling, too?

Returning to the words of my colleague Alyssa Augustson, there are "lots of ways to talk about prophetic words pushing us out of the comfort of the nest, temptation to revert back to the comfort of old ways/nest, expectations of families when a young prophet returns home and challenges their comfort."

There's no place like home. Well, only sometimes.

And so church, I invite you to think with me about when we have seen this narrative of growth and differentiation and challenges to "the way things have always been done" in play in our own lives, in our own context.

As I've listened to young activists in the Black Lives Matter Movement and in the Climate Justice Movement, on occasion there is frustration that some

elders don't agree with their strategy and tactics. "Why are youth stopping traffic?" "Why are they yelling cuss words?" "Why are they defacing historic statues?" "Why are they using social media so much?" And the youth are wondering, "Why don't they respect that this is our version of nonviolent civil disobedience?" and "Why are they more offended about the way we dress or the four-letter-words coming out of our mouths than by the situation that causes us to protest?"

And with antiracism work right here in our own church: Black, Indigenous and People of Color in our community who have been part of this church family for years are finally feeling comfortable enough and trusting enough to ask those of us who are White to see them and to respond to their cares, hurts and concerns. They are asking us White folks to take steps to learn and grow so that this community does not perpetuate white supremacy, even in subtle and subconscious ways.

Antisemitism in the USA is increasing, and for years Jewish folks have been asking Christians to do better in combatting this dangerous way of thinking, because Christians have two thousand years of oppression and dismissal and murder of Jews to answer for. For decades, if not hundreds of years, antisemitism has been the canary in the coal mine for rising fascist sentiment. Church, my fellow followers of the Way of Jesus, we as siblings in the Abrahamic family tree have a special responsibility to root out antisemitism in Christianity.

I believe each and every one of us could name more situations in which we've had the fledgling-leaving-the-nest experience, only to return to find that something has changed...or even, that something that needs to change has not. There have been times in all of our lives when someone who should "get it", doesn't. When someone who should have your best interests at heart can't understand how you've grown or changed or accept the truth you need to speak. But friends, we don't need to be all-knowing or all-understanding in order to say "Yes, I believe you. I support you. I love you."

And so I wonder, beloved church, what is Jesus asking us to hear in this passage? What is Jesus, two thousand years removed though we may be, asking us to know about him, though we may not understand it all? Though we may have been in church all our lives and feel like we know him?

Those ancient prophetic words from Isaiah are *calling us in...*into relationship with Jesus, who shared these values. Into just treatment of widows and orphans, and all who are oppressed by powers of domination. The ancient words Jesus reads are calling us to remember that he was formed by the Jewish tradition and that from his birth community onward he was taught to show up for those who need allies.

Friends, the gospel is preached to us sometimes from surprising places. We are called in by people we've known for years, people we know intimately, who are our neighbors or our families or our colleagues, people we might feel we know all about. We receive the good news from people whose presence is taken for granted, who appear to us as the kid we've taught from birth, as the grandmother whose forgetfulness is increasing day by day, as the Lyft driver whose philosophical wanderings are kept to himself. Sometimes truths said in front of a community we love can take us by surprise, can push us into a place of discomfort, can raise our hackles of defensiveness so much so that we say "this isn't my home," "I'm not sure I belong here anymore," "everything is changing."

But through God's grace, we've had leaders among us who remind us to listen for the voice of the Holy through others around you. We've had children among us who remind us to be open to surprise as we receive the heart of gospel teaching, that is, love and justice, from folks who we might otherwise dismiss. We've heard the truth from unlikely people in unlikely places, and now, we are faced with the question of what to do with it.

What do we do with the truth that is spoken, that makes us uncomfortable, that calls us to reassess our lives and our relationships? What do we do with those words of life, that sometimes are wonderful and sometimes are hard to take in?

In the Feasting on the Word commentary, Robert M. Brearley writes, "The Holy Spirit comes when we have something to do for God and a time to do it. Following this Jesus means accepting his mission and his time. What would change in our lives and in our churches if we stood in the pews on Sunday morning and declared to God and to one another, 'God gives us no other day than today to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and new beginnings to all who have failed'?"

Friends, hear the good news: we are not alone in this journey of following the Way of Jesus, of receiving the biblical stories that have been passed down to us and wondering what to do in response. The Holy Spirit accompanies us, just as She accompanied Jesus through the wanderings of his early ministry detailed in the gospel according to Luke. Follow the wind of the Holy Spirit, the breath that enlivens all things, as She prompts us to assess and reassess our understanding of home.

Dear ones, open yourselves to wonder. Even if you've raised a person from birth or known someone all your life or shared a pew for 40 years, be curious about someone else's experience. Practice seeing and hearing and knowing their heart. We are not so different from each other, and yet there is always more to know about someone else's experience, and why they are who they are.

We may leave the nest to find that we are different, that we learn and change and grow, and we return home wanting to retain those teachings that have shifted our understandings of ourselves and our life's missions. Or we may be watching others learn and grow, and wondering how to support them, though we don't completely understand what is going on in their hearts and minds. All of that is ok, beloveds, because in the stories of Jesus, we have one model of returning to ancient words uplifting justice, to putting in the work, side by side, to co-create with God a kin-dom to which all belong, to which all can recognize as a welcoming and inclusive and radically loving home. We know that we have today and we have each other, and so let us keep showing up, and keep hearing that voice, and keep our hearts open to where the Holy Spirit calls us next.

May it ever be so.

Amen.