

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C  
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
January 23, 2022  
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Psalm 19  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a  
Luke 4:14-21

## Preaching in Your Hometown

For seven and a half years I served on the staff of Bishop Robert Wright in the Diocese of Atlanta. As many of you know, I was Episcopal Chaplain to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport—the biggest parish in the whole Church. And I served on the bishop's staff working on innovations in ministry. On Sundays I itinerated around the Diocese of Atlanta, which is all of middle and north Georgia, from Perry in the south to Clayton up near the North Carolina state line in the north and all places in between. I brought greetings from Bishop Rob and shared good news of happenings in various parts of the diocese with folks in various other places. And I encouraged and consulted with congregations around innovations in ministry.

Three years ago on this Sunday, the third Sunday after the Epiphany, I was invited to go home to my hometown of McDonough (Donna from McDonough, that's me) and to preach at St Joseph's at both services.

A few months before this the rector had issued the invitation, and when she did I checked on the readings of the day, just to stay informed. And after I took a quick look, I got in touch with Denise and asked her if she had picked that Sunday very deliberately, asking me to preach in my hometown on a gospel text where Jesus preaches in his hometown.

For Jesus not only goes home in our gospel today, he goes home and also gets asked to preach. And he preaches a one-sentence sermon: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It occurred to me three years ago that, in attempting to follow Jesus as my model in all things, I could go home to McDonough, go to service at St Joseph's, stand up to read the gospel, and sit down and give a one-sentence sermon.

I was confident that my Uncle Si, my mother's baby brother, a member of St Joseph's, would approve of that approach. He always times my sermons and tells me not to go too long.

As a thought experiment, knowing I would be preaching in my hometown about Jesus preaching a one-sentence sermon in his hometown, I wondered, "If I were to preach a one-sentence sermon from today's gospel in my hometown, what would it be?"

I came up with this: Going home is tricky sometimes.

After we have gone away, when we come back, either home has changed, or we have changed, or both.

People may be proud of us or glad to see us or shocked that we came back or turn their faces away from us or some combination of all these things.

Our gospel today concludes with Jesus' one-sentence sermon. But stay tuned because next week's gospel recaps the one-sentence sermon and picks up with the next verse, which says: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." It takes a pretty big turn right after that, and I'll leave that till next week's sermon.

Last week we took an Epiphany season detour into John's gospel and went with Jesus and his mama and his four new disciples and a whole bunch of other people to the wedding in Cana, three days after his baptism.

Today we rejoin Luke, our gospel companion for this year, Year C, in the Revised Common Lectionary. In Luke, after Jesus joins throngs of others and is baptized by his cousin John in the River Jordan, he goes on a vision quest in the Judean wilderness, a fast of forty days and forty nights during which he is sorely tested.

And after that spiritual challenge and the temptations that were part of it, Jesus comes back to his home region of Galilee. He is clear on his purpose, focused on his mission.

Nazareth isn't Jesus' first preaching stop. He preaches in synagogues around Galilee and word of this preaching tour spreads and gets favorable reviews.

And then he goes home to Nazareth. The scroll is handed to him, already turned to this familiar passage from Isaiah. He stands up to read this portion from the prophet, a passage addressed as always to a community and, in this case, a passage describing numerous groups and demographics within a community and signaling the mission of individuals to engage those on the margins: the poor; the captives; the blind; the oppressed. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon *me*,” it says, “because God has anointed *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.”

He sits down after reading. It’s what was done in synagogues: you stand up to read; you sit down to preach or teach.

And then he gives that one-sentence sermon. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” What was that about?

As usual, there are numerous possible interpretations. Going home is tricky sometimes. Perhaps Jesus, knowing that most people at service in his hometown synagogue that sabbath probably knew that passage from Isaiah practically by heart as he did, was thinking, “Y’all, we all know the mission. Let’s go do it.”

Not, let’s decide who is most deserving of our charity or whose difficult circumstances are really their own fault and the result of their own bad choices. No.

Rather, the message is let’s go be the people of God wherever we go, in the knowledge that the Spirit of God is upon us, with us, and within us, willing to engage the worst situations with compassion and integrity.

What does that look like?

Going home is tricky sometimes. Either we have changed, or home has changed, or both. It’s the case in our first reading today as well. Nehemiah is among the people of Israel who has been in exile in Babylon. The first deportation of Jews from Palestine to Babylon happened in the year 597 BCE. The temple in Jerusalem and most of the city were destroyed in 586 BCE. The captivity in Babylon lasted for decades, about 70 years. Finally, the Jewish people are allowed to return. When they come back to Palestine as released captives, they are astonished and dismayed to see the city of Jerusalem and the temple of God in ruins.

Nehemiah had been cupbearer to the king of Babylon. Eventually, he becomes the governor of his people back home in Palestine. He works closely with the priest and scribe Ezra and together they mobilize the people to rebuild.

The people of Israel have been in captivity in a foreign land. It's the only land those born during the exile have ever known, but they have heard stories of home. When they return and see the devastation of the places their elders and ancestors have always told them about, and when they hear the scriptures they have never had access to before read to them, they weep and are in mourning. They understand the gap between how their lives have been and what God has intended for them.

Nehemiah's and Ezra's words of comfort to them are, basically, *You aren't to blame for what you didn't know. Now we know.* Or as Maya Angelou, poet of blessed memory put it, "When you know better, do better."

For Nehemiah and Ezra and all the people, going home was tricky. Home had changed, and they had changed. And in going back home they changed even more. They found Jerusalem in the worst possible condition, worse than they could have imagined, and they engaged that difficult circumstance with integrity and with compassion for one another.

Over 600 years later Jesus's words to his hometown synagogue crowd draw on that long history and heritage. The reading from Isaiah declares that the people of God are to proclaim release to the captives. They should do this in part because they have been the captives, more than once, and have been released from captivity to go home.

In a sense the passage from Isaiah is a recap of their own story as the people of Israel. They have known poverty, captivity, blindness, oppression. They know the need for alleviation of poverty, release from captivity, recovery of sight, freedom for the oppressed. They know partnering with God in turning the upside-down world right side up is the gracious invitation of God to God's people across the ages. They know the passage by heart. Jesus calls them to live what they know.

His sermon says what needs to be said. His presence is powerful. His actions are in alignment with his words. He is our model in all things.

We are, as the reading from 1 Corinthians puts it, one body with many members, from many backgrounds with many gifts and competencies and skills. Nobody has

to do everything; no one body is supposed to do everything; nobody can do everything. We are not all called to the same thing, but we are all called to something.

Here in our hometown, who and what need our attention? Who are the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed? Where are they? Who needs us to speak the gracious word of God's favor to them?

What are we each called to contribute to this mission of love, of restoration and reconciliation? From everything entrusted to us—time, money, talents, skills, energy, presence—what is God asking us, what is God asking me, what is God asking you to contribute to the living out of God's mission for us in this ministry context of Key West and the Lower Keys?

Jesus is our model in all things. Somebody say Amen. Our model in all things. How does Jesus love in his hometown? And how will we?