

## Going Home and Sending Off

Because Wednesday was the fourth and the office was closed, I needed to decide on a sermon title earlier than usual in order to proof the bulletin Monday morning. Deciding on sermon titles usually happens for good reason after I have spent several days with the lectionary texts. So I told Brandy the one I was giving her on Monday probably wasn't going to be the one for the week. And I was right. I e-mailed her the change in time for the printing Thursday so today's title came from thinking about the gospel text. This text from Mark's narrative seems to have two distinct themes—Jesus goes back to his hometown and his first assignment for those he has gathered to take the message he is giving. This text takes up the story of the Galilean ministry of Jesus after several accounts describing the healings he has accomplished as he has gone from village to village. Before Jesus leaves Capernaum where his first disciples are called and where he begins his teaching and healings he has gone out alone to pray. When they come looking for him as more villagers have gathered to be healed, he tells them, "Let us go on to neighboring towns so that I might proclaim the message there also (1:38)." In these first stories, what Jesus does amazes people, and what he is saying—that message he brings—is recognized as being different. That Jesus is said to speak with authority is often the refrain heard from those who encounter him. Today's passage begins narrating a story of Jesus returning to his family's hometown—the place where they resettled after Herod's death. Jesus leaves the shoreline of the Galilean Sea and goes to his hometown with his disciples following him. There is no mention of the crowds which have attended along the seashore to hear him just before this leaving their villages to travel with Jesus. No mention is made of the day of the week that Jesus come into town, but as seems to be the case what is significant in the narration is what happens on the Sabbath day. "On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue." He is known as the son of the carpenter, the one that has lived in their village, not as one trained in Scripture, not as a member of the priestly tribe—just a local boy who grew up and became a carpenter. He then wandered away from the village and has now returned bringing with him an entourage. Those gathered that morning in the synagogue waiting to hear a reading from the Torah, a reading accompanied by some interpretation based on the scroll. They would have expected to hear nothing startling or unusual. After all he and his family were well known, were part of the community, were just like them. However, what happened when Jesus began speaking was not what they expected. We are told that "on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue and many who heard him were astonished." Astonishment was a common response in the other villages, but here the astonishment leads to something different. Those present began to grumble among themselves: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands?" Mark continues his tendency to brevity, not telling us what it is that Jesus is teaching. Luke gives a more detailed account saying that the reading was from Isaiah and what he said had implications that Jesus was the Messiah. But Mark only gives us the response of these folks who have known Jesus and his family. They can't believe that such a great gift would be given to someone they know and whose family they know. In many ways their response is a common one—how dare he have something that we don't? How could someone this powerful have grown up in our midst and we did not know about it? How could a message

this astounding and deeds a powerful as we have heard happen through someone we know? When hearing Jesus it seems this audience was focused on themselves; on maintaining their own status quo and comfort with it. This is often true of us as well. When we are focused on ourselves, on maintaining our superiority and control over our surroundings and others, we are not open to the truth that God seeks to speak to us, sometimes through people we know and in places we thought we knew like the back of our hand. This might be the root of the reason that prophets are never honored in their hometown and among their own kin. When we read scripture we find much to comfort us, but there is also much to challenge us. Sometimes the challenges offered through Scripture make us uncomfortable—ask us to move into areas we consider unsafe. In the series of books called the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, the character of Aslan, the Lion King of Narnia, represents a Christ figure. Lucy, who is the first of the children to venture into Narnia through the back of the wardrobe door, meets with Mr. Beaver. Mr. Beaver begins telling her about Narnia and the king Aslan, who is “on the move”. He is coming to set things right in Narnia. Lucy is curious about this Aslan, whom she has never seen or met, but anticipates that she will. Lucy asks, “Is he safe?” Mr. Beaver’s reply is “Who said anything about being safe.? “Course he’s not safe, but he’s good. He’s the King I tell you.” Jesus is like Aslan when he comes to Nazareth—“He’s on the move.” Jesus is good, but not safe. Not everyone wants to take the leap of faith to believe that he is the Son of God and then follow him along the hard and narrow path of discipleship depicted by Mark. Not everyone is willing to allow Jesus to work deeds of power through them. In many ways following Jesus has never been safe or popular. When injustice and oppression occur, they occur because those in power validate them. Speaking for the vulnerable is not a popular thing to do. Many refuse to welcome and hear Jesus’ message for he calls his disciples to leave what is known and expected, to accept challenges to their view of the world and see a different reality—a reality that heals and restores. As Jesus leaves Nazareth, Mark adds this comment: “And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.” To me that poses an interesting question. There is a term, oxymoron, which seems to fit this statement. An oxymoron is a word or expression which seems to contradict itself. To those folks whom Jesus healed by the laying on of hands, a deed of power had been done. But it seems that even those healed did not recognize the source of their healing. Healing did take place so Jesus’ amazement at their unbelief may be a comment on their failure to realize the source of the healing. We consistently run the risk of missing the movement of God in the midst of the ordinary events of our lives. As those hometown folks could not open themselves up to receive and recognize God’s healing power through Jesus, we too can miss out on God’s power in our everyday lives. We can fail to hear voices calling out God’s message of love and acceptance for the other. God’s attributes are hard for us to grasp. God is boundless and beyond anything that we can grasp. God is described as omnipotent, all powerful, omniscient, all knowing, there are more dimensions to the divine that we can find terms to express—even human terms like infinity and eternal do not cover or explain the divine. These terms set God at a distance. Yet there are other dimensions just as true. God is omnipresent—everywhere, all the time. God is so deeply invested in this creation that God is deeply present in every part of it, but God is not bound by or completely contained within it. So what do all those big fifty cent words mean? They mean that God chooses to work

through what God calls and creates. They also mean that whenever God chooses to work through a person, or a people, or a nation, to bless them, it is never about their special worthiness but about bestowing upon them a responsibility to be in service to others in demonstration of God's love. When telling the story of Abraham's call, we often forget that he was called not only to receive a blessing but that through him all peoples were to be blessed. Taking seriously this notion that God is actually present in the reality of this time and place, there is a part of our nature that seeks to pull away. There is a tendency to ignore or just fail to see God's call and movement which takes us to places where we are not at ease. We relish the sense of being called, of being included as God's claimed children, but often reject the accompanying responsibility to acknowledge that this inclusion is not because of our worth, but God's grace. God's presence in this world which is so broken can be overlooked—we can fail to see how God is calling us to bring God's message of love, healing and restoration—we can miss the opportunity to experience God's deeds of power in our midst. We can keep our knowledge of God and God's grace to ourselves, not risking speaking of God's concern for the "other" in our midst; not proclaiming God's message not only of love, but also God's message that justice prevail. Our selected text continues by telling us that after Jesus left Nazareth, he continued on to other villages teaching. But something else happens—he sends out those whom he has called to go two by two giving them authority over unclean spirits. They are told to take little with them as they journey. Verse 12 and 13: So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." Yet Jesus made provision for what the disciples should do if any place did not welcome them or refused to hear them. They were to leave that place. What they were not to do was to stop the proclamation of the message. Just like we read in God's call to Ezekiel, Ezekiel was to give them God's word, whether they heard or refused to hear. That too is our call—to discern God's voice when raised even in unexpected places or through unexpected sources—and then to take up the message and proclaim it whether we are heard or not. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.