

Hometown Church or Worldwide Ministry?

(2 Samuel 5: 1-5, 9-10; 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10; Psalm 48; **Mark 6: 1-13**)

On this fine Sunday morning, I'm going to suggest once again that we work a *field trip* into our sermon time. How about if we do an imaginary walking tour out in the fresh air, over in the Holy Land? OK, I'll punch in the GPS coordinates and presto, we're in Nazareth, which is the setting for our gospel text. If we start out in the old village of Nazareth and then climb the rocky hilltop that rises above the town (imagine High Rock Lookout, or Pegg's Mountain, but just a little closer to town), from a height of about 1,300 feet we'll get a clear sense of where we are in Galilee. Looking to the south and east, across the broad Jezreel Valley, you can see a lot of geography and lot more biblical history. There at the far side of the valley is the spot where King Saul had his final date with disaster. Down in the centre of the plain is where Gideon and his men won their upset victories. Off to the left is where young King Josiah was killed in battle. A little farther on is the place where notorious Queen Jezebel met her fate. To the northeast, about 15 miles distant, you can make out the Sea of Galilee on a clear day. To the west, about the same distance away, stands Mount Carmel where the prophet Elijah had a showdown with 400 priests of a different religion. Beyond that mountain lies the brilliant blue Mediterranean Sea.

You can see a lot from that hilltop. In a sense, you could also see a lot of the *world* from there, because even back in Bible times, three great highways crossed that valley. There was the road from the south that connected Galilee with Jerusalem. There was the great Way of the Sea, the ancient coastal road that connected Egypt in the southwest with Damascus in the northeast, and along which camel caravans were always moving. And there was a strategic east-west road that ran right through the valley, by way of which the Roman legions, just like the Greeks before them, were always moving out to the eastern frontiers of the empire.

The gospel writers seem to suggest that Nazareth was a small, insignificant hamlet, out of which it *would* be a surprise if anything good *ever* came. Compared to all the neighbouring towns and villages, Nazareth *was* a remote "backwater". The place is never mentioned in all the Hebrew Scriptures, and Mark, in his gospel, *keeps up* that tradition. Did you notice that Mark *didn't* call the place by *name*, but merely said that Jesus visited his hometown? If that seems like a subtle insult, it probably *was* and I'd venture to say it could have been deliberate.

Maybe in some ways Nazareth was a bit of an embarrassment, but nevertheless it did have a great view and a clear sightline on history, and it had the traffic of the known world virtually at its doors. I can well imagine there were times in his childhood when *Jesus* made the hike up this very hill and sat gazing at the same panorama of history and geography. And then, there was one other time in his life when he made the trek up this hill, says Luke in *his* gospel. Only on this occasion the climb was not made in peaceful silence, but rather with angry shouts and insults ringing in his ears. His own hometown people nearly threw Jesus headlong from this hilltop, and he *narrowly* escaped becoming yet another chapter in the bloody history that's written on the valley floor. It's a little odd, perhaps, that

Mark doesn't tell us *that* part of the story. But on the other hand, *if* Mark's primary purpose is simply to contrast this little hometown congregation with the *wider* ministry that Jesus had in view, then it makes sense.

I've always wondered what it was about the preaching of Jesus that could make people who had known him since childhood react like that and actually want to kill him. People with whom he had no doubt chatted in the marketplace, or through the window of the carpentry shop, or on the way home from synagogue week after week. Usually, it's not an *easy* thing to offend your own people, much less to turn a worshipping community into a lynch mob—unless of course you're a Presbyterian, and then it's far more common! You'd think that the family ties and childhood friendships would be strong enough to *hold* even through a bumpy sermon or an unpolished performance. Usually the hometown crowd are glad enough to see you that you don't have to worry too much about what you're saying or how it's going to be interpreted. Whatever the rules that normally hold in such situations, Jesus must have broken them all. His hometown folks couldn't get him out of the synagogue and up that hill fast enough.

Luke, in *his* gospel, goes to great lengths to *explain* how Jesus got in trouble—the text he picked, the sermon he preached, the hatpin he used to pop their balloons, the analogies he used to really get them steamed. But amazingly, Mark doesn't feel the need to explain *any* of this. For Mark, it's the simple fact that these hometown people had known Jesus since he was a toddler with droopy diapers. *That* says it all. That's the kind of familiarity that often breeds contempt. These were the same folks, of course, who had also whispered behind his back since he was a toddler, about his questionable parentage and, let's face it, they probably used a particular word for him when they were whispering on that topic. These were the folks who knew things *about* him, who thought they knew *everything* about him, and who wouldn't let any of that stuff go.

In a curious way, I can *relate* to at least some of that awkwardness with regard to the hometown crowd. I have never wanted, *ever*, even a *tiny* bit, to preach in the congregation that I attended as a schoolboy. *Same* reason—it's because *they* knew stuff about me, or at least thought they did, and *I* knew stuff about *them*, for example, about how some of them treated each other, about hatchet jobs done on other people in their absence but never to their face, about some of the families where the kids got beaten with regularity. It's the hometown curse—they know your *family*, so they think they know *you*, and you know stuff about *them* that they cannot or *will* not admit. That's the issue for Mark. The folk in Nazareth *think* they know Jesus because they know his family and his siblings and his livelihood and at least part of his story. But he knows more about *them* than they can ever bear to hear.

Without exactly explaining what happened there in the Nazareth synagogue, Mark does get the point across that Jesus managed to wake those people up, he got their full attention and even managed to get them on their feet and ready for action—of *some* sort. Sometimes, simply *waking them up* might be the whole point of the exercise. I heard this story a while ago. Two guys from the city had recently arrived in heaven. One was a preacher; the other had been a taxi driver. One day the Lord was

making his rounds when the preacher asked Him if He had a minute. "Sure" said the Lord. What's the problem?" "Well" said the former pastor, "I'm not very *happy* here in heaven." "Why on earth not?" asked the Lord. "I don't like to complain, Sir, but that taxi driver over there is getting much better treatment than I am, and I don't think that's right, since I preached your Word on earth very faithfully to the same congregation, week after week for 52 years." "Well, son," said the Lord, "the truth is, when you were doing *your* work, most of the folks were *sleeping*. But you know when that taxi driver over there was doing *his* work, man, they were *praying!*"

Do you get the impression that Jesus didn't care too much about preaching according to the rules? Or that he had no interest in playing to the hometown bias? Do you get the sense that he was deliberately *trying* to wake people up, and that he had no patience for that age-old religious exercise of dividing the world up into the categories of "Us" and "Them", "Insiders" and "Outsiders"? And if you think that was a problem *only* for those folks in the Nazareth synagogue, *you* may be mistaken too. You see, I know this for a fact—and if you're willing to be a little honest, you might have to agree—that the prevailing definition of a *good* sermon is one that is pleasantly *short*, doesn't try to explain too much, doesn't get noisy or personal, but just gives you a "warm fuzzy" and a nice little pat on the back. In other words, if it doesn't make you *feel* good, it probably wasn't a *good* sermon. If it doesn't assure you that you belong to the privileged few, then maybe you *should* have slept through *that* one, or just played golf instead.

It is highly instructive that all the while the Nazareth folks were whistling the Jewish version of "Gimme that Old-Time Religion" Jesus was giving them the exact *opposite*. He could not and would not disguise the fact, even for old friends and neighbours, that his ministry was *worldwide* in scope, that it allows *no* special favour or status for the *few*, it allows no dividing between people as to those who *belong* and those who don't. To phrase that in even more dangerous language, this is a ministry that's intended to be just as social and political in its concerns and actions as it is spiritual in its foundation. The ministry of Jesus is designed to offer good news, healing and freedom to *all* the world's *disadvantaged* people, no matter *who* they are or *where* they are. And there's the rub—if by the grace of God we don't happen to find *ourselves* among the "*disadvantaged*", then it's our business and responsibility to see that the good news, the healing and freedom gets delivered *to them*—not only in *words*, which are delightfully cheap and which most people *can* sleep through, but in *actions*—in money if that's what it takes, in medicine, in food, in fair business practices, in foreign policy that's not self-serving, and in changes that actually help to *break* the *cycle* instead of just keeping that cycle going. Far from conferring privilege or advantage upon us who have heard and believed, this is first and foremost a call to *serve*, to get *active* and *involved* in the task of bringing healing and hope to those who need it most. On *that* basis, a good sermon would be one that sends you virtually running out the door, no, not to get away from it, not because you can't stand any more, but to *get to work*, to get on with the *action*, because you just can't wait another minute to share some genuinely good news and to

make some new possibilities *happen* for someone else. Well, on *that* definition of a good sermon, the people in Nazareth *almost* had it right—they were indeed running for the door. The only problem is that they were running *after Jesus*, to throw him off their hill, to keep him *out of their* little worldview.

That hometown bias, the same one Jesus encountered, is always trying to sneak back into the Church. You can catch a glimpse of it whenever the eyelids around you begin to droop, whenever the voices get all sweet and syrupy, and the emphasis is all on *personal* faith, *private* spirituality and very *local interests* at best. When the spoken word does not challenge in the least any of our pet assumptions or dare us to adopt new attitudes and a *wider* perspective toward the world around us, that's a sure clue that we have become a hometown Church *and* have lost the *worldwide* ministry that Jesus once gave us. In Mark's gospel, when the hometown church shows its true colours, that's the *very* moment when Jesus takes his ministry *on the road*, out to the world. That's when he sends his disciples *out*, to get to work, to get in on the action.

The hometown Church, whether it's in Nazareth or anywhere else, simply cannot bear to listen to *Jesus* preach. For all its talk about faith and all its pride in being faithful, that hometown club has *little* room for Christ and *no* room for *his* kind of ministry. Given the chance, that hometown Church will *throw* him out and *keep* him out. So, here's the bottom line: if we are not *worldwide* in our vision, wide awake in our listening and ready to bust out the doors and spring into action, we might *not* be a Church of *Jesus Christ*.

They say you can see a great deal from the hilltop above Nazareth. Jesus certainly did. In a strong sense, he saw the *entire world* from that hilltop. I think you can see a great deal from the hilltop above any church, and whether or not there actually *is* a hill close by, you can still see a lot of history and a great deal of the world that still cries out in bitter anguish, in brutally inflicted pain and in justified anger. You can see a great deal of the world that lives on and suffers on, in desperate need of the healing and liberating ministry of Jesus Christ. You *can* see it, but *only* if you *look*. And only if you look with a view toward *change*, toward turning faith into action, and turning love of Christ into love of neighbour and love even of stranger.

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