

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

July 4, 2021 – PENTECOST 6 / PROPER 9B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Steppin’ out of the ‘Hood with Jesus*”

Ezekiel 2:1-5	(God sends the prophet to speak to His rebellious people)
Psalms 123	(We lift up our eyes to the one enthroned in Heaven)
2 Corinthians 12:2-10	(In our weakness is Christ’s strength perfected)
St. Mark 6:1-13	(Jesus is rejected by His hometown, and sends forth His disciples to preach, teach, and heal)

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Several years ago, an Episcopal diocese was celebrating its one-hundredth anniversary. As part of the festivities, a beautiful coffee table book had been produced which contained short histories of each of the parishes, along with many appealing photos. At the Diocesan Convention that year, the book was being sold everywhere and anywhere, between legislative sessions, in the exhibition hall, you-name-it. There was even a table set up in the narthex of the cathedral where the convention Eucharist was being held. The book was being sold to worshippers as they walked in.

When the diocese’s recently-retired bishop took to the pulpit for the sermon, he began by saying, “I’m sorry about the commotion you heard a few moments ago. A long-haired, raggedy homeless man got into the church. He was shouting something about his father’s house being one of prayer, and he turned over the tables where we are selling our book. Don’t worry, we got rid of him.”

Of course, the bishop was kidding. There was no commotion, no scruffy guy from the streets. But the bishop also wasn’t joking. He was leveling a clear criticism using the story of Jesus’ clearing of the Temple to critique the diocese’s overzealousness in pushing the glossy book. The bishop was concerned that the zeal for the commemorative tome was getting more attention than the mission of the church.

“Don’t worry, we got rid of him.” Hmm. If that’s the case, where *is* Jesus to be found? And where *do* we encounter the Holy? Is it only at church? Or if He’s everywhere, then what?\*

Let’s look into today’s Gospel story for some hints as to where Jesus can most reliably be found. Today’s lesson begins with Jesus returning to His hometown of Nazareth, located in the region of the Galilee. His disciples, who are also from the Galilee, are accompanying their leader back home. In 1940, Thomas Wolfe penned a novel, “You Can’t Go Home Again,” which gave rise to an expression meaning once you leave home, it will never be the same again. And, as Jesus returns home, this becomes abundantly clear, because now, He has a significant number of followers—and that was way before Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook.

It would seem that Jesus was invited to be the guest preacher in His hometown synagogue, that Sabbath, and those who heard Him were astounded. They were spellbound, awestruck. Then they began to murmur amongst themselves, “Isn’t that the guy we knew from the neighborhood? Didn’t he install your cabinets?” “That’s right! I know his brothers and sisters. I just saw them at the falafel stand on Wednesday.” Or, something like that.

After all this wondering and recognition, the next sentence is a surprise: “And they took offense at him.” But why? They were blown away by His powerful, authoritative preaching! Yet, when they realize Jesus is “one of them,” all of a sudden, they find Him offensive. Jesus then demonstrates a masterful use of the double negative, “Prophets are not without dishonor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And then, Mark tells us that because of His former neighbors’ unbelief, Jesus could do no deeds of power in that place, other than healing a few sick people. Does this mean that if we lack faith, Jesus will not work miracles in our lives or cure us of our diseases? No. If we recognize that Christ is our Lord and Savior—which the Nazarenes *did not*—even if our faith is weak or faltering, Jesus will still come through for us.

Jesus’ response to the rejection by His hometown can be summed up in the advice He will later give to His disciples about *their* itinerant ministry: “Any place that does not welcome you or listen to you, when you leave there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet as a testimony against them breaking all ties with them because they rejected My message.” (Mark 6:11, *Amplified Bible*)

As Christ and His followers depart, they move on to the surrounding villages ... and then something interesting happens. One might think that, given the hostile reception Jesus received in Nazareth, He would be eager to give 'em the old razzle-dazzle, doing amazing healings and working astounding miracles.

*Instead*, Jesus pairs off His followers and sends them out two-by-two with special instructions. They are to travel lightly as they preach the good news of repentance and forgiveness; cure the sick; and cast out evil spirits when they encounter them.

Jesus doesn't give 'em the razzle-dazzle because He has no desire to embarrass the hometown locals. Rather, He authorizes and empowers regular people to go out in His Name to testify to God's mercy, heal, and rebuke the devil. This is quite instructive about how God operates, in general. He doesn't need to puff Himself up, throw lightning bolts, or savor a braggadocios moment. God's power, as shown forth in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is lived out in humility, simplicity, and charity. It is power that, instead of lording it *over* others, pours itself *into* others, so that they—and *we*—can become more and more like Him.

Besides all this, we see something in this story that is as troubling as it is interesting. Although Jesus' former neighbors realized He was a member of Joseph and Mary's household, they did not recognize or accept Jesus as One who came from—and indeed, is *filled with*—God.

Even so, as He preaches, their eyes are opened just a tiny bit, and as a result, they are *offended!* More accurately perhaps, they are frightened and become angry. This sometimes happens to people in our century, too, once their unbelieving hearts become tenderized by hearing the Word of God preached with power.

What frightens and angers them is the realization that their lives, habits, values, and priorities will have to change if they allow themselves to go all the way to connect with, and be transformed by God. This should concern all of us who claim to know Jesus, since the Church is now the hometown of Jesus.

But are *we* offended by Him? Last Sunday, we heard that a lot of Jesus' ministries involved one scandal after another, and toward the end of His life, He ended up ticking off a *whole lot* of people. If we, like Jesus' Nazarene neighbors, have allowed Jesus to become domesticated into merely a kindly carpenter, perhaps we *should be* offended by Him! At times, the Church, and even individual Christians, have sought to carefully contain Jesus in a safe, leak-proof box. But Jesus keeps stepping out of that box, departing from the familiar, and empowering others to do His work in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and churches. Most important, our Lord keeps showing up in strange places that are not His hometown.

And that's where we will most reliably find Jesus, *outside of* His neighborhood, His hometown. We will find Him in the rubble of that collapsed condo in Surfside, Florida, and in the drug-dens of inner-city Philadelphia. Alongside the Amish plowman, and in the State Capitol at Harrisburg. In the parts of Africa scourged by starvation, disease, and violence. In the rocket fire and mortar shelling of the conflicted Middle East. On Wall Street, and with our soldiers around the globe.

We who meet in this sanctuary each week come for both solace and strength, believing that Jesus is present with us, both in Word and Sacrament. But let us not forget that Jesus is also found outside the Church, everywhere in the world. Ever since that day when the women found an empty tomb, His followers—and that includes us—have been going to where Jesus promised to go ahead of us, into Galilee, into the whole world, as well as into our own hometowns and neighborhoods. And when we go where He leads, seeking Him in the face all whom we encounter, Christ will be revealed and recognized as God's anointed One. And it is entirely likely that He will then empower us to do His work, telling others about God's love and mercy; helping to salve their wounds and pain; and calling out social and economic evil wherever it rears its ugly head.

So today, let us go forth from here, into the surrounding "villages," as Mark writes, following Jesus wherever He leads—and not simply following Him, but opening ourselves to being empowered and equipped by Christ to do His work of love, healing, and justice, which the world so desperately needs. *Amen.*

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\* Adapt. Joshua Bowron, "Hometown," <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/hometown-proper-9-b-2018/>> 28 June 2021.