

Third Sunday after Epiphany—Year c
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I know a few things about small town life. I was raised in a tiny town with a population of 1800. My dad taught at the local high school, and my mom taught at the local elementary school. Because my parents were out in the public so often, people tended to know my name and tended to know a lot about me—even when I hadn't lived in that town for 20 years.

To this day, I could go back and, without too much trouble, find people who knew me, my brother and sister, my parents. And I would not be surprised to learn that people had followed my schooling or my career down the years—kind of a “small town boy makes good.” Many of you from small towns could probably tell similar stories.

I was thinking about the idea of the small town boy when I read today's Gospel story. Jesus has been doing some preaching and teaching in the region in which he was raised. And then, in today's story, he arrives at Nazareth, his home town. He returns as a young adult and begins to teach and to preach to the elders in the synagogue there. The small town boy is making good.

Except, I wonder if there was a bit of discomfort when Jesus entered the synagogue.

I think that the reason we are proud of the kids that grow up in our communities and then go out into the world is that we hope or maybe even expect that they will typify our values. Sure, they may go off to college and see the world—maybe invent something or become a skilled musician—but even in pursuit of these dreams, our expectation is that they will shine out to the world those things about our community that we know are special. Those things that are tried and true about our culture.

What happens, though, when the small town boy starts to get ideas of his own? What happens when he goes off script? What happens when he begins to talk differently than us, or preach words we don't particularly want to hear.

When Jesus stands up in the synagogue, he requests the scroll of Isaiah. He reads it in front of all the religious leaders—in front of all the people wearing special, religious clothes (you know who you are). He reads: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent 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.*

The small town boy is preaching some things that might be a little hard to hear. He preaches that the poor will receive good news. He preaches that the captives will go free. That's good news for the poor and the captive, but it's usually pretty bad news for the rich and the captor. Whenever you preach that someone is free, you're preaching against the system—against the powers that be—even in a small town, even in a small church, even in a synagogue two thousand years ago.

How brave Jesus must have been—to go into the heart of his upbringing, his family, friends, cousins. And to challenge the religious powers of his day. Would you have the kind of guts it takes to say what needs to be said? I'm not sure I would. I like going to my hometown and having everyone like me. I'm not sure I would have the courage to say the hard things.

Jesus is preaching freedom to the people of Nazareth. In one sense, this message is not really for us—it's for people who are long dead and half way across the world. But the lovely thing about scripture is that, at the same time, it is written absolutely for us. Imagine Jesus standing in OUR small church, preaching freedom to us?

In Galilee of Judea, the freedom might have something to do with the end of the occupation of Palestine by the Roman Empire. We know in our time that the Roman Empire has long been dust. But what freedom is Jesus preaching to us today? What are the bonds that we need to have loosed?

Maybe we feel tied to an image of how we should be—of perfection in body or appearance or place in society. Jesus says you are set free from that.

Maybe we feel like we are on a hamster wheel of productivity at work or at home—having to do and do and do to carve out a place for ourselves in our busy, money-obsessed society. Jesus says you are set free from that.

And maybe, we feel captive to what it means to be a perfect parent, a perfect child, a perfect friend or a perfect spouse. I'm here to tell you that no such thing exists, and Jesus says you are set free from that.

So, Jesus walks into his hometown, not to sit around the local bar and to reminisce about high school football or get caught up on the local gossip. He goes to his hometown to preach a radical freedom from the things of the world. We can't be captive to money or to government or to power or to our own expectations—because, Jesus says, we belong so wholly to God. We are so completely creatures of God that there is no other time or space to be captives to anything else.

That is the kind of experience we get when God visits God's hometown—a sermon about freedom from the things of this world that cling to us, impede us and sometimes even destroy us. And Jesus doesn't seem to mind ruffling a few feathers in the synagogue so that he can get his point across.

So, as you go into the world this week, remember Jesus preaching in Nazareth about the absolute freedom we have in God. And do your best to get comfortable with the idea that, even against the forces of the world that would have it otherwise, we are perfectly free precisely because we belong to God. Amen.