



Central Peninsula Church

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Familiarity Breeds Neglect

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

It's hard to forget the first time for anything. Most of us remember the first time we left home. We remember the first kiss, the first time behind the wheel, the first job, and the first stirrings of an idea that later changed the direction of our life. As believers, perhaps we remember our first answered prayer, our first Bible study, the first steps of faith we took in obedience to Christ, and our first attempts at explaining to someone how Christ had changed our life. It seems that often the first time we do anything kind of sets the stage for the second time and third time and fourth time. It's a foundation that we build on.

Have you ever wondered if it was this way for Jesus? Did he just arrive on the scene fully developed, fully formed as a servant of God, or were his first movements towards maturity and ministry filled with the same awkwardness that ours are? What about the first attempts Jesus made at preaching the gospel? What was that like? If we go back to those first steps he took in ministry, his first attempts at preaching the gospel, we'll see that there was something going on at the beginning that would set the stage for what would happen at the end.

I. JESUS BEGINS HIS GALILEAN MINISTRY

After his baptism in the Jordan River and his temptation in the wilderness, Luke hits the fast forward button and moves us ahead in the life of Jesus to his return to Galilee for an extended period of ministry. Galilee is in the northern part of Palestine. It is about 50 miles square with a large lake in the middle and many surrounding small villages. It was in one of these towns, Nazareth, that Jesus grew up. It is here in Galilee that Luke presents Jesus to us as cutting his teeth in ministry; taking his first steps in preaching the Gospel. He begins by giving us a brief account of those early days in Galilee.

“And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all” (Luke 4:14-15).

Luke summarizes a number of months by telling us that Jesus ministered in the power of the Spirit. We know from other gospels that Jesus performed miracles during this time. But Luke focuses on the fact that it was as a preacher that he gained his reputation. Jesus began

to teach in various synagogues. This all resulted in quite a stir. News spread about Jesus; people were quite impressed with this young preacher.

It's not until v.16 that Luke almost hits the pause button. When a narrative slows it's always because something important is taking place. In this case, Luke wants to show us what kind of message; what kind of preaching would draw such attention. He presents to us a first sermon which Jesus preached in Nazareth, as well as its results. Luke highlights this event because it was programatic of his entire ministry. It set the trajectory for everything that would come after.

II. JESUS' BEGINS HIS FIRST SERMON IN NAZARETH

“And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, ‘THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.’ And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (vv. 16-21).

Jesus comes to his hometown of Nazareth. He enters the synagogue where he had been so many times as a boy. The service would have started with a recitation of what Jews called the Shema. Then some prayers would have been offered. Then it would be time for the Scripture reading. A passage from the law would have been read first, and then one from the prophets. It was customary for the reader to stand when he read. After the reading, he would sit down and present some comments in the form of a sermon. Jesus stands up to read from the prophets. No doubt he was invited to read because he had been causing such a stir and they wanted to hear what he had to say. He's given the Isaiah scroll and reads from chapter 61:1-2 which speaks of the coming ministry of the Messiah. He sits down and people wait for his comments. His first words are a bombshell. “Today...”

These words would have echoed in that synagogue like thunder. This is not just another Bible reading about the coming Messiah. Jesus is saying, "Something is happening in this room today, which Isaiah predicted 600 years ago. I'm the fulfillment of that prediction."

III. THE INITIAL REACTION OF THE PEOPLE IN NAZARETH

After this brief introduction to his sermon, Luke records what the people of Nazareth were thinking. You would think that these people, of all people, would buy into what Jesus was saying. I mean, they were in a privileged position. They had watched him grow up. Some of them had gone to school with him. They had seen how he handled homework and teachers and peer pressure. They had watched him grow up into a man who supported his mother and siblings as a carpenter. They had seen how he ran a small business. They knew him as a man of integrity; a man whose life could back up such claims to greatness. But the people of Nazareth aren't so sure. Look at v.22. **"And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'"**

On the one hand, the crowd is impressed: "This guy can really speak. He really has a gift. I mean, he seems to know his way around the Bible well enough. And that text from Isaiah was a great choice. His Hebrew is sure strong! He's very good. He really has potential! We should get him back here some time."

But on the other hand, what he says doesn't seem to fit with his pedigree: "Isn't this Joseph's son?" Of course you and I know that he's NOT Joseph's son. But for them this is a bit of a stumbling block. "How can Joseph's son, a carpenter from Nazareth, who we all know so well, be the promised Savior spoken of by Isaiah?" It's funny how it's possible to enjoy a sermon, but somehow rationalize away its impact on us. It's possible to do this with Jesus as well. It's possible to speak well of Jesus and marvel at his gracious words, but somehow remain immune to his message, and sometimes the problem is that we know him too well.

It's interesting to me how these people were in a privileged position to have been so familiar with Jesus. In some ways they had a unique opportunity to respond to him. When Jesus says "Today..." he confronts them with an immediate choice. It's not about what happened yesterday. It's not about tomorrow. It's about today. But somehow that familiarity, that privileged position, turns out to be a liability. This ought to be a warning to us. We live in a nation which has deep roots in the Judeo-Christian

tradition. In one way or another, many of us grew up with Jesus. He's familiar to us. And here we are in a church that claims to be centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We're committed to the Scriptures which reveal that very thing. But I wonder if your own familiarity with Jesus might also inoculate you from really being impacted by his life. When that happens, what presents itself as an opportunity for personal blessing really becomes an occasion for personal tragedy.

I'm told that a good preacher knows how to read his audience. He's able to even make adjustments midstream to address their state of mind. Jesus isn't finished with his sermon yet. He goes on and he says a number of things to confront them with their own stubborn unbelief.

IV. JESUS CONFRONTS THE NAZARENES WITH THEIR OWN UNBELIEF

"And He said to them, 'No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, "Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" And He said, 'Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian'" (vv. 23–27).

At the heart of this sermon is a principle: no prophet is welcome in his hometown. We have our own way of putting it: familiarity breeds contempt. But I'm not so sure that's the best way to put it. I would say that a truer reflection for describing the offspring of familiarity is found in the following phrase: "Familiarity breeds neglect." Contempt may be one of the fruits of familiarity, as we'll see shortly, but it is not the first fruit. It's like when you're driving close to home. A cavalier attitude toward the roads is created by our belief that we know the road – the potholes, intersections, traffic patterns. Our familiarity with the road breeds neglect of any dangers. Remember, these people are impressed with Jesus' speaking ability. They like Jesus. At least on the surface, there is no contempt here; to hesitate to welcome someone is more akin to neglect. But why? Why does spiritual familiarity; spiritual privilege, often breed neglect? The answer lies in Jesus' sermon. He says three things about this:

A. The need for proof: First, he reads their minds. He says, "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, Physician heal yourself! We've heard about all the miracles you did in nearby Capernaum. Why don't you do a few here as well." I wonder if deep down they feel a little gipped.

Jesus lived in Nazareth for 30 years and they hadn't seen one miracle. Then he goes off to Capernaum and all they hear about is all these miracles. "What's the deal? Why can't you do here what you did there?"

The San Jose Mercury ran an article about Tom Brady, the QB for the New England Patriots. It starts out, "If he ever finds his head getting too big, Tom Brady has a foolproof cure. He checks his freshman yearbook. In 1992 Brady played his first football at Serra High School, although the verb 'play' stretches things a bit." You see, Brady was the backup QB on a team that couldn't win a single game. He played behind a guy names Kevin Krystofiak, who now sells insurance. Brady is poised to win his third Super Bowl later today. But early in his career, Brady had a hard time getting his hometown friends to believe in him. Krystofiak remembers that when Brady was a rookie playing behind Drew Bledsoe, Brady called him and confided that he thought he was as good or better than Bledsoe. Krystofiak's reaction was, "Yeah, right."

In essence, that's what Jesus' old friends in Nazareth are saying about him, "Yeah, right." They want to see it for themselves. If he did it Capernaum, he could do it right here at home. But that's not how Jesus operates. Throughout his ministry, Jesus refused to pander to the requests of sign-seekers; people who demanded miracles in order to believe in him. In the gospel of Mark, we're given a different angle on this same story. Mark says that while in Nazareth Jesus "could do no miracle there" because of their unbelief. The point is NOT that he was unable to perform a miracle, but that he wasn't free to exercise his power under those conditions. His power knows no bounds, but his use of that power does. He won't show his power to those who are faithless. He won't overwhelm people with his power to make them believe. Why? Because when hearts are closed, nothing will convince them anyway. Notice, by the way, they didn't necessarily even believe that he could really do miracles. In v. 23 they say, "**Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum...**" instead of what was actually done. A.W. Tozer said, "The unbelieving mind would not be convinced by any proof, and the worshipping one needs none."

Sometimes those of us who know Christ get jealous when we hear of the things Christ is doing elsewhere. We wonder, "Why can't he do that here? Why can't he do that in my life or in my church? I've known Christ my whole life. Why can't he do for me what he does for them? Maybe he can't do any of it." Our faith begins to shrivel and we begin to look elsewhere for help. Familiarity may not breed contempt, but it does breed neglect.

B. Putting God in a box: The second thing Jesus says about this is in vv. 25-26. Every good sermon has to come out of the Bible. So Jesus turns our attention to the OT book of Kings. He takes two examples from the lives of two famous prophets: Elijah and Elisha. He says that God

sent both of those prophets outside of Israel to non-Jews. There were plenty of widows in Israel, but God sent Elijah to a gentile widow in Zarapheth. There were plenty of lepers in Israel, but God sent Elisha to a leper in Syria. Why would this have been such a stinging argument? First of all, he compares the folks he's talking to with Israel in the days of Elijah and Elisha. That's like comparing us with people in the dark ages who worshipped statues of Mary. In the days of Elijah, Ahab and his wife Jezebel ruled in Israel. It's not a very flattering comparison. Second, he uses their own Scriptures and their own prophets to indict them. Remember, these people claimed to be people of the book. But Jesus throws their own book at them. They thought they knew it, but they obviously had missed a few things. How easy it is for us to selectively use the Scriptures to bless and endorse our own beliefs and lifestyle, all the while ignoring the parts that indict us! Thirdly, this would have stung them because it indicated that God was just as interested in reaching gentiles as he was his own people—the Jews. These people were flat-out prejudiced. Apparently, there were a lot of gentiles in Capernaum, where Jesus had been spending a lot of time. The people in Nazareth didn't like that. As a matter of fact, this was true of the whole nation, not just those in his hometown. Jesus says it's no different than in the days of Elijah and Elisha when they were both sent to outside of Israel to gentiles. Notice that this implies that Jesus does not go to the gentiles because he was rejected by the Jews, but he is rejected by these Jews because he goes to the gentiles. He's working outside their own box!

Familiarity with Jesus can breed neglect because we put God in a box. We think we know how God works. We think we know WHO really belongs to God. We think we know the Scriptures. But we don't really let ALL the Scripture speak to us; only the part that justifies our own lifestyle and prejudices. We Evangelicals like the part about sharing our faith with others, but we're not so excited about what Scripture says about social justice. We like the part about loving one another, but we're uncomfortable with the idea of loving our enemies and turning the other cheek.

A few years ago I began reading some books by a man names Henri Nouwen. His books ministered to me at a very deep level. I began a correspondence with him and even went out and spent a week with him at his home in Toronto. I can honestly say that he taught me more about prayer and about grace and about intimacy with God than anyone else. There was only one problem. He was a Catholic priest. What do you do with that? I didn't agree with him on everything, but I had to let God work outside the little boxes I had created for him, not only in who I cared about, but who I allowed to care for me.

Familiarity breeds neglect, but if we're not careful that neglect can turn into contempt. What began as a mixed reaction turned into a raging mob scene. Look at vv. 28-30.

“And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way.”

They got a miracle, but it wasn't exactly what they expected. What caused such a violent reaction?

C. The problem of pride: Perhaps the real problem is pride. Spiritual pride often goes on with familiarity with Jesus. It goes back to the reading Jesus gave from Isaiah. It's clear that Jesus is saying that he's the Messiah; the one Isaiah wrote about. But Jesus was also saying something about the crowd who was listening to him that day. Jesus was saying, “YOU are the poor...YOU are the imprisoned...YOU are the blind...YOU are the oppressed. That is true today, right here in this synagogue. Today, something is happening that for you to be a part of will require that you see yourself as that needy.” Isn't it interesting that the example Jesus later uses from Israel's past talks about a widow and a leper—two very needy people.

What if Jesus were right here in this building as a guest preacher? What would he say? He would say the same thing about you and me that he said about his friends at Nazareth: “You are the poor, the imprisoned, the blind and the oppressed.”

And what would we say? “Who me? How can I be poor with my Stanford degree, my Silicon Valley job, and my three bedroom house? How can I be imprisoned when I'm free to travel or move or do whatever I want? How can I be blind with my strong body that works out four times a week and health insurance just in case something goes wrong? How can I be oppressed when I'm the boss and people take orders from me?”

Jesus comes to us and says, “Yes you.” Jesus is always looking deeper than the circumstances of our lives. It was true in that synagogue in Nazareth; it's true today. He's looking beneath the surface of our lives where we categorize ourselves in terms of education and jobs and cars and houses and family, and he is saying, “When I look at the core of your soul I see poverty, blindness, imprisonment, oppression.”

That's what Jesus was always doing. In Jn. 8 the Pharisees say to Jesus, “We're Abraham's offspring and have never been enslaved to anyone.” Jesus responded, “Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.” In John 9 the Pharisees say to Jesus, “We are not

blind, are we?” And yet Jesus' favorite label for the Pharisees was “blind guides.”

Jesus requires that we make a radical shift in how we define ourselves. We have to change our minds about ourselves. To come to that point which requires that we let go of certain attitudes. We have to let go of our denial which says, “I don't need to change. Everything's fine.” We have to let go of our defensiveness which says, “It's not that big of a deal. Nobody's perfect.” We have to let go of our tendency to blame others, “It's his fault.” We have to let go of our procrastination which says, “I may need to change, but let me wait until tomorrow.”

CONCLUSION

Familiarity breeds neglect, but if we're not careful that neglect can turn into contempt.

Later in the gospel of Luke, Jesus was invited to the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. As they sat around the table, someone said, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.” I don't know if it was the wine or just the good company, but it was the kind of thing someone says when they're feeling pretty good about life.

In response, Jesus told a story. He said there once was a man who threw a big dinner party and invited many guests. When it was time for dinner he sent his servant out to tell the invited guests that it was time to come in and eat. Then they all began to beg off, one after another, making excuses. The first said, “I just bought a piece of property and need to look it over. Send my regrets.” Someone else said, “I just bought a new team of oxen and need to check them out. Send my regrets.” Another said, “I just got married and I need to get home to my wife.” The servant went back to his master and told him what had happened. The master was angry and told the servant, “Quickly, get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a good meal—all the poor and crippled and blind and lame.” The servant did as he was told, but there was still room at the table. The master said, “Go back out and search the highways and the hedges and invite them to come and eat. I want my house full.”

It's a sad story for the invited guests because they missed out. They were the ones who everyone thought would be there. They were the ones who knew the master the best. But they had better things to do. The question we must ask is, “Where am I in that story? Is it possible that my familiarity with the Master has made me immune to his invitation? Have I put him in a box? Do I no longer feel like I really need his ministry of setting the captives free?”

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