

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You cannot go home again, Yeshua.

Today's gospel lesson is made up of two quite distinct parts. The first is the visit by Jesus to his hometown of Nazareth, and the second is his sending out the disciples two by two. These parts are distinct not only because each is a story unto itself, capable of standing alone, but also because they stand in such vivid contrast to one another.

The first is a story of failure. After initial enthusiasm, the hometown folks turned against him, and he was unable to do any miracles there. But the second is a story of success as the disciples "cast out many demons, and they anointed many sick people and healed them."

It is strange in that, up to this point in Mark, Jesus, who had been teaching with power, healing, and casting out demons, now could do nothing, while the disciples who are so often missing the point, even missing in action, are powerful and effective. It should come as no surprise that many commentators urge the preacher to pick but one of the two stories or parts to preach on, and not both. Yet, still, they stand together, and perhaps there is a reason for that. Maybe old Mark was onto something.

Together, these two scenes have something to tell us, not only about God and God's power, but about our part in God's power. Together they tell us about the power of faith and also something about the power of sin. And also tell us something about what happens when ego and pride get in the way. When we get in the way...and what happens when hope, faith and expectation clear the way, and God takes central place.

Let's look at the first part. We might imagine that now things would go well back at home. That here Jesus would be received with joy and affirmation by those who knew him well. And at first, he was...surprised, astonished, by his wisdom and power. But quickly their surprise turned to offense. "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son? And they took offense at him.

What happened? He was one of them, at least recently. But there may lie the problem: that one who had so recently been just one of them should suddenly now be so far above them. Did that feel like a slight? Who does he think he is? Why him and not me? Just yesterday, it seemed, they had looked down upon him as a boy. But today his words and demeanor asked that they look up to him. Was that hard on their pride?

Remember last week, when we considered the woman touching the cloak of Jesus as an act of faith? That opened up the opportunity taken by Jesus...the opportunity to proclaim, to the crowd, that she had been healed by God because of her faith. Jesus was, and is, the opportunist who looks for those moments to react to the expressed faith of others...their faith in God. Here, in Nazareth, these old familiar people were distracted...distracted by his family history and their memories of his boyhood...instead of being focused on God, even if it was through the carpenter's son they knew.

And ...today? Today, who would we think of as Jesus' hometown crowd? As his own people? Well maybe, that would be us, the church? Does it ever happen that at least sometimes WE are those who are blind to God's presence, indifferent to God's power? Is it even remotely possible that we who think we know Jesus the best may at times honor him the least?

In his spiritual autobiography "Now and Then," Frederick Buechner writes of his off-the-beaten-path (at least for a seminary-trained, ordained Presbyterian minister) encounter with Agnes Sanford, a Christian healer. "The most vivid image she presented," writes Buechner, "was of Jesus standing in church services all over Christendom with his hands tied behind his back, unable to do any mighty works because the ministers who led the services either did not expect him to do them or did not dare ask him to do them . . ."

That is quite an image: Jesus standing in the church, his hands tied behind his back. Is it possible that we in the church, the latter-day hometown crowd of Jesus, are sometimes the least likely to call upon him? The last to turn to him? Less likely than many others to be open to his power and promise, his mystery and his grace?

Often today we in the church seem more focused on ourselves...whether our proud past accomplishments, our current projects, or our persistent problems...more on these things than on God's power and truth.

I read about the Rev. Anthony Robinson, and his account of a visit to a once prominent church, a church that had for decades been known far and wide as the home of great preachers and a center of great social causes. Like many, however, this church had declined in recent decades.

When he arrived to give a lecture there, he was met by an officer of the church. As he was early, the church official asked if Robinson would like a tour of the grand facility. As they walked, he told Rev. Robinson that twenty years ago he had feared for the future of his church. In fact, he said, "I was pretty sure than by now we would have closed our doors. You see, we were just fifty elderly people left in this great sanctuary." Then he brightened. "But something has happened. Something has changed. We are experiencing a kind of renewal, a revival."

"Really," Rev. Robinson said, "that's wonderful." "Yes, these days we have four or five hundred people in church. We have new ministries in the community. We are seeing new people, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight."

"How do you explain this?" Robinson asked.

He thought for a moment, his hand on his chin. Then he said, "Well, it wasn't all our new minister, but he has made a difference."

"What's he done?"

"Well, he got us studying the Bible . . . yes, our minister gives a wonderful Bible Study. In fact, he can give you the entire message of the Bible in just seven words."

"And what might those seven words be?" Robinson asked skeptically.

The host, an older African-American man, grinned broadly. "The seven words that summarize

the entire message of the Bible?... 'I am God and you are not.'"

"I am God and you're not." Sounds kind of silly perhaps, but I don't think it is.

It is not about you, not about us. It is about God.

That once great church had become so focused on its past glories and singular prominence that they had forgotten the real source of the church's power and of its life . . . the power of the living God. Their collective pride and ego had prevented them from buying the ticket.

Now, humbled by their decline but blessed with leadership who understood that it was NOT really about them, they had turned to God afresh, calling upon God to guide them, praying to God to renew them. They had acknowledged their own need for healing and for change. They had come to know God and God's power in a new way, in a new time. They had taken risks in faith. They had bought the ticket.

When Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, he did not reject them in turn, although it must have been painful for him. He did not take offense. He only sadly shook his head and then moved on. He moved on, sending his disciples out, two by two, to preach, to heal and to teach. He said something interesting to them: they were to travel light, to "take nothing for the journey" but the clothes on their backs.

In these times of change and challenge for the church or in times of challenge in our personal lives, God may be telling us to "lighten our load," even helping us to do so.

God is calling us to let go of some weighty assumptions about how we have always done things. God is telling us, like that once prominent church, to leave behind those big, bulky suitcases stuffed full of "pride" and "ego." God is asking us to surrender some baggage.

God is using this time of challenge and change to strip these things from us so that we might travel light again, relying upon God's power alone to guide us and trusting God's grace to uphold us.

That we might repent from our tendencies for distractions, for our lack of faith in the almighty God.

That we might allow Jesus to turn toward us and declare the miracles of God is our midst, all in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.