

**Epiphany 3C
Luke 4:14-21
January 24, 2010**

“When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.”

Jesus came home. Home to the place where he had been raised, to the people who had known him since he was a toddler. Home to the same places, the same routines, the same little habits of life that had helped shape him into the man he became.

Jesus came home, and on the Sabbath day, he went to the meeting place, to the synagogue, because that was his custom. That’s what he had done, week after week, month after month, year after year, as he grew from a boy, to an adolescent, to a man. There he heard the ancient scriptures read. There he heard the men disputing over how to interpret the scriptures, how to live a holy Jewish life. There he learned to pray, to read, to examine and explore the riches of his tradition. There he learned to handle the scrolls himself -- a young man hoisting their heavy weight to the table, unrolling them to find, there, in the dense, dark strokes of the Hebrew text -- the word of God to Israel.

If Jesus was a Jew at all, much less a good Jew, it was because of that place and those people, and all the hours they had spent together in that synagogue. If he was worthy now to be handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, it was because everyone there knew that little Yeshua -- Mary and Joseph’s boy now all grown up -- would give them an accurate reading and a lovely interpretation.

He opened the scroll. He must have known exactly what he was looking for, as he read. “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.”

And he began his interpretation. “Today,” Jesus said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

And that’s where our story ends for today. It’s a nice ending. Things are looking really good for Jesus. But this is actually part one of a two-part story, and we will hear part two next week.

And just to give you a head’s up, things don’t go very well for Jesus after this auspicious beginning. He hears different things in the words of Isaiah, promises from God that don’t quite resonate with his old friends and neighbors. He hears mercy, justice and forgiveness – for everybody, not just for Jews. He hears good news for the poor and the oppressed and the captives – of every nation, not only Israel. He hears the voice of a God who is large and gracious, whose mercy is everlasting, and whose love pours out on the just and unjust alike. A God who loves indiscriminately, whose grace is for the healing of everyone, who draws no boundaries, who leaves no one behind.

And that is not the God his friends from Nazareth know or understand. To their ears, Jesus is talking crazy talk. Their God is a God for *them*, the chosen people, the nation of Israel. The prophecy of Isaiah is good news for the poor – the poor of Israel, impoverished by Roman taxes. The release of captives – Jewish captives, imprisoned for resisting Roman rule. In their minds, his text is good news for God’s Israel alone.

And so they all stare at Jesus, thinking: *Who is this guy? We thought we knew him. He grew up among us. He’s Mary and Joseph’s kid, and we know they raised him right. So what on earth is up with little Yeshua?*

In Matthew and Mark’s version of this same story, the people of Nazareth actually say, “Where did this man get all this????”

Where did this man get all this? Indeed. Where on earth could Jesus have learned this indiscriminate, infinite, all-encompassing love of God ... good news large enough to encompass the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike? Where did this man get all this?

I was thinking about this text last week, when I was not here, and when I understand that Sarah preached an incredible message about the earthquake in Haiti. In my mind I had already jumped ahead to this lesson, partly because it was scheduled for this week, and partly because I, like Jesus, was going home.

I went home to the Sarasota-Bradenton area of Florida, where I lived between the ages of 11 and 21. I had not been back for a long time, and so, on Sunday, as is my custom, I went to church. I went to the church that raised me, Church of the Redeemer. It is a large, stone church with big red doors facing out on Sarasota Bay. There I was confirmed and married. There I spent week after week in youth group, and in choir.

And there I was told that women could not be ordained, and that girls could not be acolytes, because it might inspire them to WANT to be ordained. Redeemer was not always a welcoming place.

But I wanted to go back anyway. It was my custom, after all, and I wanted to be in that space again and hear that organ and see the giant cross hanging like a sword over the altar. I wanted to sit in the balcony with three of my old friends from youth group days and giggle and pass notes and sing side by side with them, like we did so long ago.

My sister refused to go. She didn't want to spend her morning in a church whose politics and positions were hateful to her. It was like a giant wall between her and God, the things they said to us when we were young, and the stances they still take today.

But it wasn't that way for me. I was happy to go, and happy to be there. And I realized something amazing as I sat up there in that balcony, between my beloved husband and my oldest, dearest friend.

What I learned at Church of the Redeemer wasn't necessarily what they taught me. And the God I met at Church of the Redeemer was not necessarily the God they thought they were introducing me to. In that place, on those Sunday evenings at youth group, wrestling with questions of faith ... in that choir, singing hymns of praise with all my heart ... on my confirmation, kneeling on the chancel steps to commit my life to Christ ... I met God at Church of the Redeemer. A much bigger God than they proclaimed.

As I grew up in that church, surrounded by those people, I met a God of tremendous love and acceptance, a God who taught me to love others in turn. I met a God of joy and celebration, too large to be contained. I met a God who made a home for me there at Redeemer, at times when my own home was a dangerous and disturbing place.

So when the people of Nazareth grumble and complain, when they ask, "Where does this man get all this?" they don't realize ... Jesus got it THERE. He got it from THEM. He grew up in that synagogue, surrounded by scripture and prayer and teaching and debate -- and in the midst of that, he met his Father-God. And he discovered a message of love and acceptance and inclusion that was much, much larger than anything his village teachers proclaimed.

This happens over and over again, throughout history. The church tries to lock God up in a box, and he just keeps getting out. Some folks try to teach a God who functions one way, and God cheerfully goes about the business of being bigger and more loving and more troublesome than they could imagine.

African slaves in the old South learned the story of Exodus and realized that the God their slave masters taught was actually a God who meant to free the slaves. Peasants in El Salvador read the Bible in the 1970s and discovered that God did not intend for them to be crushed under dictators' heels. Gays and lesbians have read the Bible and discovered a God who made them and who loves them – just the way they are.

And in the streets of Port-au-Prince last week, singing rose through the darkness, the voices of people who knew that God was NOT punishing them, who know that God did NOT mean for them to suffer, and who trusted God would bring them through their trials. “Beni swa leternel,” they sang. “Blessed be the Lord.”

Where do these people get all this? They get it from turning up, week after week, year after year. From listening, really listening, to the words of the scripture and the songs, and hearing in them the very voice of God.

And so may it be for us, as we bring our children, drag our teenagers, and haul our own sorry selves to church. We don’t know, really, what any of us are hearing, or learning or absorbing. We teach, we preach, we proclaim, and we try to reflect the God of our tradition, the God of our understanding. And if we are lucky, if we are blessed, if we keep turning up, week after week, year after year, with our ears and hearts open, all of us ... from the smallest baby to the oldest gentleman ... might meet more than just that small God, the tiny God of our tradition, the limited God of our understanding.

God, the big God, the all-loving, all-saving, all-encompassing, indiscriminate, accepting, and empowering God may come to us, cutting through the clutter, busting out of the box, erupting out of the very words of scripture to bring us ... us poor, us blind, us imprisoned, us broken, bruised and longing humans ...

His very self.