

Text: Luke 4: 14-21  
Title: Hometown Hero  
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How does where you come from shape who you are? How does your place impact your sense of self? Is your worldview determined from whence you view the world? Does your hometown matter?

Jesus grew up in Nazareth.

Located in Galilean hill country, first century Nazareth was an insignificant Hebrew village of maybe only four to five hundred people. Much of the housing was caves or huts built into the side of a slope. There's little evidence of trade or agriculture of any consequence; and there's no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament or the Talmud. In the Gospel of John when Nathaniel asks "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he may have been besmirching more than just its size. Nazareth was the other side tracks. It was a dog-eared, two-bit, no-account, scrub-brush town.

But, just over the hill from Nazareth was Sepphoris. It would have been about an hour walk. Sepphoris was set on top of a hill at the intersection of two trade routes. You can see it from Nazareth. It was politically connected, culturally rich, militarily important, and beautifully cosmopolitan....

There were stone-paved roads and Roman columns.

There were bath houses and detailed mosaics.

There was a theater and a market.

There was a synagogue and an aqueduct.

A first century historian referred to Sepphoris as, "the ornament of all Galilee."

In fact, many scholars think that when Jesus said that, "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden," he was talking about Sepphoris.

A good deal of Sepphoris was built on the backs of cheap Hebrew labor. And, while some of the architectural beauty of Sepphoris was built after Jesus, the foundation, the character, and the contrast between Nazareth and Sepphoris was built or being built during the first thirty years of Jesus' life.

So, it seems entirely plausible that if Joseph (the father of Jesus) was a carpenter, the only work he would have found was in Sepphoris. It is entirely plausible that most every morning Joseph and Jesus would have hiked over the rise to work at building this cosmopolitan-city-jewel.

Our text this morning reads as the coming-out-party for Jesus.

He returns to his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath, and as the neighborhood kid who was making quite a splash, he was handed the scroll of Isaiah to read. How he landed on this particular passage is unclear, and what we have recorded is an odd splicing together of a couple verses and phrases from Isaiah, but Luke writes that Jesus read:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor....*

Then, as he sat down, taking the posture for preaching, people pressed in to hear his first sermon and Jesus threw down the gospel gauntlet.

*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*

The word here for “fulfilled” (*pleroo*) could better be translated as filled-full. It means to cram a net, level a hollow, or fill to the brim. It’s a word that describes a completed accomplishment. There is nothing more to do, nothing more to add. The time is ripe, arrived, full. It’s now.

When I was in Israel I stood on the sun-bleached-stone-streets of Sepphoris and wondered if Jesus ever felt like a kid from the other side of the tracks. Standing where the ruts of Roman wagon wheels are still visible, I wondered if Jesus thought of himself as poor. Did he know the Roman boot on his throat? Did he walk back to Nazareth with the day-laborers and listen to their laments and longings? Does where you come from determine how you see the world?

Because....

When Jesus stood up to read in his hometown synagogue, he didn’t turn to a text about the beauty of earth or the glory of the heavens. He didn’t pick a passage pointing to repentance. He didn’t scan the scroll for scripture about sin. Jesus didn’t preach about belief or read a verse about doctrinal purity. Instead....

Jesus read to the poor and the marginalized that the good news was theirs.

Jesus read to the oppressed and imprisoned that they were free.

Jesus read to the blind that they could see.

Jesus read to a bunch of co-workers and friends

that the city on the hill was a mirage,

that the kingdom was at hand,

and that they were no longer outsiders, rejected, or marginalized, but were

accepted, emancipated, and the day of the Lord’s favor had arrived.

It was a stunning short sermon with an audacious application. It shook his neighbors to the core. They didn’t know what to make of it. In few short verses they’ll run him out of town, he’ll go from hometown hero to hometown heretic, but initially they’re amazed and maybe even caught up in the vision....

Does where you come from determine how you see the world?

Dear friends, historically-theologically-practically the church has softened the edges of Jesus’ reading of Isaiah. We’ve done Jesus the favor of reading his first sermon through the filter of history and the lens of privilege.

Surely Jesus meant all of this spiritually. Jesus didn’t mean that the doors of the jail should be unlocked, he was speaking metaphorically. Or, Jesus wasn’t suggesting that

Nazarene day-labors would get a fair wage. And surely, he didn't mean that the blind would really see....

The good news was for the poor of spirit.

Freedom was from the captivity of sin.

The recovery of sight was spiritual vision.

Sin is what oppresses, liberation was from damnation.

Right?

But, I gotta-tell-ya, when I stood in the ruins of Sepphoris and looked toward Nazareth, spiritualizing this text made little sense to me. It barely seemed plausible. If what I saw of Nazareth and Sepphoris was true, then what Jesus proclaimed must have also been real, tangible, earthy, and physical. It seems like a cruel joke if Jesus says to the poor and oppressed that their mansion is in heaven and he's simply going on ahead to prepare rooms for them.

It seems more likely that the Hebrews saw the mansion on the hill, and this announcement by Jesus from Isaiah was about the coming of real, tangible, earthy, physical justice, freedom, and *shalom*. And not simply a spiritual reality....

I want to be clear. I'm not dismissing a spiritual interpretation but I'm wondering if there's something more. Can our reading of this gospel story be filled-full?

So, what are we to make of this text? Better than 2000 years later, when Sepphoris is an architectural ruins and Nazareth is a bustling city, how should we read this text? How do those separated by time, place, and position understand this proclamation?

Maybe it's helpful to come at it this way...

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The south had seceded, the union of states was in tatters, and the Civil War was taking an enormous toll. The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Lincoln, in his claim to authority over the whole of the split union, contended that the proclamation was true and real. He proclaimed that the slaves were free.

However, the slaves who lived within the Confederacy remained in bondage. Many didn't even know about the proclamation. Its authority was denied and nullified by local and regional powers. And yet, in reality, from Lincoln's perspective, they were free. As the union was restored, as confederate states assumed their rightful place, and as the slaves came to realize their freedom, their emancipation was already a reality.

My apologies to history teachers and Civil War buffs, I know that the proclamation didn't include the north and some border states. I know that real freedom was realized more slowly and with more complexity – not unlike our freedom. But the image seems helpful....

For Luke, this announcement in the synagogue is the inaugural address of Jesus. The kingdom had arrived. The time was full to the brim. Their emancipation was already a reality. They just didn't know it yet.

And then in the next few chapters, Luke stacks up snap shots of the lame being made to walk, the blind being made to see, those in chains being released, and the dead being raised. He stacks up pictures, evidence, of this new reality.

Jesus read in Isaiah a hope that was etched deep in the souls of those Hebrews with bent backs; he tapped into an ancient image of a coming day when God would put creation to rights. Then he said, “Today is that day....”

He didn’t offer a new vision or call for them to grab pitch forks and storm Sepphoris to remake reality. He said, “This is reality: You’re free. The day is now and the day is coming. Live into your freedom.” He didn’t change their economic situation, but he did announce the arrival of a full-orbed-*shalom* in which they could live into the way of God.

Dear friends, may it be so with us...

May we have the faith that in Jesus of Nazareth, God has come and is coming. And therefore, may we hope, believe, and live like *shalom* is creation’s ultimate reality, that love will ultimately win.

And because that’s true we’re free to seek justice and cherish mercy and walk humbly with God. We can pursue economies that are equitable for all, we can work for freedom from whatever imprisons, we can see the imprint of God’s image in all and seek their flourishing. We can love friend, neighbor and enemy in honest practical ways because our current relationships are not the end of the story. We can seek reconciliation, speak the truth, and traffic in forgiveness...

We’re a long way from first century Nazareth. Our hometowns have shaped us in powerful ways. We don’t always recognize the ways in which we’re enslaved.

But as those upon whom God’s Spirit is poured, we are called to live into our emancipation. Whether in Oak Forest or Englewood, in Soweto or Saigon, in school, hospital and work-site, in AA or corner-tap, as those in an economic system rigged for our success, may we live as those who are free to follow the way of Jesus....

*...anointed to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor....*

Even so come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.