

This morning's gospel lesson offers two significant events in Jesus' ministry told in one story; the first is Jesus' experience in his return to his hometown of Nazareth, and the second is Jesus' sending out of his disciples two by two to further his ministry throughout Palestine into all the world.

Two by two—in the same manner as described in the book of Genesis of the animals ushered onto the ark—Jesus sends out the disciples with nothing other than a single staff in their hands; no extra clothes or shoes, no money and no food. Apparently, they are to travel light, with nothing that would hinder them or tie them down in the fashion to which most of us are accustomed—“a little of this”, “a little of that,” and “I am sure we could use this” and all of a sudden we are overweight paying additional fees for our bags over 50 lbs. The disciples are to survive, it would seem, not only by their wits but by their faith in God; trusting that God will provide for them through the goodness and generosity of those with whom they minister and with whom they live in the villages and towns of the region.

On face value as followers of Jesus these two stories should raise significant concerns. Is the story implying that we also should live as simply as did the disciples of Jesus? Should we give up our attachments to shoes and clothing, bags and belts and all the trappings of our lives? Should we surrender our savings accounts, insurances, pensions, and 401Ks and all we have been diligently building for the future that we live “on faith in God”? The answer to this challenging question is, I believe, revealed in the gospel this morning—in the bewilderment and dismay that arises for the Nazareans when Jesus, on his healing and preaching journey, returns to his hometown.

Scripture says that Jesus *could do no deeds of power* in Nazareth and that Jesus *was amazed at their unbelief*. Briefly, let's explore the meaning of the confusion that arises for the townspeople of Nazareth. Their bewilderment does, in fact, illumine our lives as disciples of Jesus in the 21st century.

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? Where did this man get all this? And they took offense at him.”

Jesus traverses Galilee preaching, teaching, offering insight into and perspectives on the Kingdom of God throughout Galilee's towns and villages. On this day and in the company of his disciples, he turns toward his hometown, the village of his childhood and adolescence, Nazareth.

One of the fascinating aspects of the New Testament is that in all four of the Gospels, none of its writers has considered important any reference to the childhood or adolescence of Jesus. Indeed, from the time of his birth in Bethlehem to moment when as a grown man he is baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, we hear only two brief stories about Jesus. His years of maturing and growing in wisdom as a child and as a young men were never recorded in the Gospels. We can only imagine what those “growing up years” might have been like.

Of the two stories we have, one is found in the gospel of Matthew which explores Mary, Joseph and Jesus' escape to Egypt from the jealous rage of Herod. It is a story we know well. Hearing from astrologers arriving from the East that a new king has been born in the land, Herod sets out to kill all the male children under the age of two in Bethlehem. Warned in a dream, Joseph gathers Mary and their infant child out of the maelstrom of Judea and travels to Egypt. We do not know for how many years Joseph, Mary and Jesus lived in Egypt, only that upon hearing of the death of the dreaded Herod, Joseph makes ready to return. Still fearing the political unrest that continues even after the death of Herod, Joseph and Mary settle far to the north, in the district of Galilee in the village of Nazareth.

Scripture offers one other account of Jesus in his youth as told by Luke when Jesus was 12 years of age. When Jesus was 12, as in every previous year, he has with the rest of his devout family and neighbors traveled to Jerusalem to observe the annual Festival of Passover. That year when his family, friends and neighbors began their return journey to Nazareth, Jesus was nowhere among them. Retracing their steps back to Jerusalem in search of Jesus, Mary and Joseph find him in the Temple in conversation with teachers of the Law. Confused

why he would remain in Jerusalem and in the Temple, Jesus responds to their question with this reply: *Did you not know I must be in my father's house?*

Joseph and Mary's confusion of who Jesus is and his purpose in the world aligns itself with the confusion and bewilderment of the Nazareans when Jesus returns to home town. The townspeople's confusion and that of his parents suggests that there are purposes for Jesus more deep and elusive that all of us together know.

A few months ago, Judyth and I returned to the small city in which I was born and raised to attend the funeral of a dear family friend. I had not taken two steps in the parking lot of the church when a voice rang out calling me by a name I had not heard in more than 40 years. It stopped me cold in my tracks, this sudden reminder of *who I used to be*, and the manner by which *I am still remembered*, at least to some, in my old hometown. I suspect it was the same for Jesus. Being remembered as Mary and Joseph's son, a chum and boyhood friend in the old days to the people of Nazareth, the carpenter's son, the one who was good with his hands. Who is he that he would lay those same hands on the sick and the lame and expect that they would be cured of their infirmities and diseases?!! Jesus is *only* the son of Mary and Joseph and old friend of the village. The village has remained much the same, why wouldn't Jesus?

Who is this Jesus, and by whose power does he assume to lay hands on the sick and the infirm?!! Do we not remember him walking the streets of Nazareth, trailing after his father and taking up the good work for which he was renown as a carpenter? Where in God's name does Jesus get the idea that he has the power of God (praise be He) in his hands? How dare he assume the prerogative that is only God's? And where does he get this fantastical idea that he might be the Son of God?

Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Worker movement. Writing about the poor men and women who came to their center on the lower East Side every day to be fed, clothed and housed, Peter called them "ambassadors for Christ". Whereas so many in those days saw those poor as social outcasts and a nuisances to be avoided at all costs, Maurin, Day and their colleagues saw these women and men as "ambassadors of Christ"—living witnesses to the life and ministry to which we are all called as disciples of Christ. Even as some condemned these poor as outcasts, others saw in them the divine light—sparks of Christ come alive.

In the way that the Nazareans could see Jesus only as the son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter and not the Son of God, like them we see Jesus with a limited perspective. We *see* Jesus the way *we want to see* Jesus, in a manner that will not challenge our lives and lifestyles.

One of the truisms of life is that everything is constantly changing. What mattered to us most as adolescents is replaced by a new thing when we become young adults. What was important to us as young adults is replaced by something different as we become middle aged. We are constantly on the move; changing, being transformed. And so is our understanding and relationship with Jesus.

What was true and relevant for us once, is not necessarily true in all times. Jesus, like us, is never static and fixed for all time. The people of Nazareth held onto Jesus as they remembered him in the days of his youth. We do the same—holding onto the idea Jesus from the old days—a long time ago.

I invite you then, as the saying goes, **to let go and let God**. To allow ourselves as Nicodemus discovered to be born anew. I invite and encourage us to see Jesus not with the eyes and images of our youth, but to let Jesus grow up as we grow and change. I invite us to let Jesus meet us today, especially in our confusion and discomfort. The question is; will we have to give up everything and all that we have worked so hard in becoming? I don't believe so. But what we will have to do is "re-arrange" some things that we make new priorities for our life with God.