

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 14, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
WHY JESUS CAME**

Luke 4:14-30

In our travels with Jesus, we have seen how the Holy Spirit drove Him into the desert to be tempted by the devil, and how Jesus defeated the devil by His devotion to and dependence on the Word of God. As it was for Jesus, the Bible is our first line of defense against the schemes and snares of the enemy of our souls. God's Word is both our sword and our shield when the tempter attempts to lead us into sin and, if he could, to destroy our souls.

Thanks be to God, as Pastor Chris reminded us last Sunday, that if – *when* – we give in to temptation, we have a loving Heavenly Father who stands ready to forgive us and to cleanse us from the ugly stain of our sins. He has made provision for our forgiveness through the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ on our behalf. Every single day, not just on a day like Valentine's Day, it is good to remind ourselves – and one another – of what love really looks like. The Bible says: "This is love: Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). In His immeasurable love, God cared enough to give His very best, His very own Son, to do what only He could do to purify us from our sins and to set us free from our guilt. As John Newton said, we are great sinners, but Jesus is a great Savior. His grace is even greater than our sin.

In today's Scripture reading, Luke tells us what happened next after Jesus' duel in the desert with the devil. In verses 14 and 15, he gives us a brief summary statement of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in the region of Galilee. Listen to these verses again: "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him." The word translated "news" in the NIV is the Greek word *pheme*, which is where our word "fame" comes from. Jesus was becoming famous in the towns and villages of Galilee. It says in *The Message* that "He taught in their meeting places [synagogues] to everyone's acclaim and pleasure." Luke uses the word *doxazo* to describe the reaction of those who heard Him speak and witnessed His ministry of healing. *Doxazo* means "to glorify." As I have told you before, it comes from *doxa*, which means "glory," and which is the root of our word "Doxology." The word was getting around about Jesus. His fame was spreading. It was limited to Galilee at this point. It doesn't appear that He was on the radar of the religious elites in Jerusalem yet. That would happen soon enough. But, for now, more and more people in the Galilean countryside were talking about Him. He was an up-and-coming celebrity. Not that being a celebrity was something Jesus aspired to!

All of this is part of the build up to Luke's description of Jesus' homecoming to Nazareth in verse 16. We know Jesus wasn't born in Nazareth; He was born in Bethlehem. But both His mother Mary and His (supposed) father Joseph were from Nazareth, and Nazareth was where Jesus was raised. Nazareth was where Jesus learned the carpentry trade from Joseph. It was in

Nazareth that Jesus preached the sermon that defined the purpose of His ministry. I thought about calling this message something like “The Homecoming,” because the fact that the events of this passage take place in His hometown amplifies its momentousness.

I also thought about calling it something like “The Mission,” because here Jesus lays out His mission by applying the words of the prophet Isaiah to Himself. But more than just His mission is revealed here. Jesus also lays out His true identity. He stakes a claim to be the long-expected, long-awaited Messiah, God’s anointed Deliverer of His people. He claims to be the One sent by God to be His people’s Savior and to usher in the era of God’s favor to both Jews and Gentiles alike.

I finally settled on calling it “Why Jesus Came,” because here, as in several other places in the Gospels, we have a clear, definitive statement from Jesus about – well, about *why He came*. More than 900 years ago, Anselm of Canterbury, an Italian monk who was the Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury (England) from 1093 until 1109, wrote a book that explored the question *Cur Deus Homo?* (which means, *Why Did God Become Man?* [Literally, *Why God a Man?*]) We’ll come back to this question next Sunday as we work our way through this passage of Scripture.

LOW-HANGING FRUIT

I want to start, though, with some low-hanging fruit – you know, the apples or oranges or grapefruit in the tree that are easy to reach without the aid of a ladder or a long-handled fruit picker. The low-hanging fruit you can’t miss is in verse 16: “He [Jesus] went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, *and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom*” (*emphasis added*). Jesus was in the habit of going to church. The church of His day was the synagogue, where faithful Jews met every Saturday for worship and instruction in God’s Word. Our meeting place, of course, is not the Jewish synagogue but the church, the *ekklesia*, which defines us as the “called-out” people of God who are united in our common faith in and allegiance to Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Savior of sinners, and Lord of our lives; our love for God, for one another, and for the world that God loves so much that He gave His only Son to die for it. We meet together not on Saturday, the seventh day of the week, but on Sunday, the first day, the Lord’s day, commemorating the fact that Jesus rose again from the dead on the first day of the week.

At the risk of restating the obvious, I’ll say it again: Jesus was in the habit of going to church. I don’t think it would be theologically correct to say that Jesus *needed* the church. He was God incarnate, God in flesh and blood. He had no intrinsic moral or spiritual need to go to church. With us, on the other hand, it is different. We *do* need the church. We need one another in too many ways to enumerate right now. We need the benefits and blessings that being part of the church affords us. We need the benefits and blessings that God offers to us in the church. We need the connectedness in relationships, in worship, in fellowship, in discipleship, in service, in witness, in evangelism, in love, in compassion, in comfort, in correction, in spiritual training to be found in the church.

The synagogue in Jesus' day was no more perfect than the church is today. But Jesus was committed to it. And I'm convinced that Jesus wants all of us, and His people everywhere in the world, to be committed to the church.

What is also obvious is that neither the town of Nazareth nor the region of Galilee was dealing with a pandemic that radically affected everyday life like the coronavirus pandemic has altered life today. (Nor, as far as I know, was Nazareth subject to ice storms, like we are today!) My point is not about whether or not you are coming to church in the midst of the pandemic or inclement weather. We all have our own personal and family circumstances to consider. We all have reasons for the personal decisions we make about where we will go, whom we will be around, and what activities we think are "safe." So, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not pointing fingers at anyone for the decisions you have made about coming (or not coming) to church.

I do want to say this, particularly to those of you not coming to church in person during the pandemic: As soon as you feel it is safe to come back to church in person, as soon as you sense the Lord is giving you a green light to come back, I hope you will do so. We miss you. *I miss you.* We miss being together with you. Whenever your personal benchmarks have been met – whether it is receiving a vaccine, or being satisfied that enough other people have been vaccinated, or something else – I hope you will resume Worship and other church activities in person.

Until then, I urge you – I urge us all – to take the commitment and example of Jesus to heart. Whether you come to church in person or not, make it your habit to participate in Worship every Sunday. Make it a priority to be in church either in person or online *every Sunday*. Thank God for the technology that makes it possible and for the expertise of our tech team to make it happen. Don't miss out on the blessing of Worship in the company of your church family. Don't miss out on the sense of connection we have with one another. Don't allow Worship to become optional. It is too important to allow that to happen.

Eugene Peterson, the translator of *The Message* and a man whose pastoral insights and wisdom I greatly admire, wrote somewhere that "There can be no maturity in the spiritual life, no obedience in following Jesus, no wholeness in the Christian life, apart from an immersion in, and embrace of, community. I am not myself by myself."

Think about that statement: "I am not myself by myself." I am certainly not my *best* self by myself. I need others. I need my sisters and brothers in Christ. I need *you*. I need your witness, your encouragement, your guidance and counsel, your support, your correction, your prayers, your grace and forgiveness, your wisdom, and your love, all in the name of Jesus, if I am to be and become what God desires me to be.

Do we need each other? Yes we do. Do we need the church? You bet we do. Yes, we need to continue to observe all appropriate COVID-19 protocols. Yes, we need to show extra care and concern for those who are most vulnerable to the virus, while also making every effort to stay connected or get reconnected to one another in Worship and every other means available to us.

Jesus loves the church. Jesus was (and is) committed to the church. If He made church a priority, so should we. In the immortal words of Forrest Gump, that's all I have to say about that.

Except for this: Someone asked the late, great Hall of Fame baseball player and manager Yogi Berra: "What's the secret to being a good manager?" To which Yogi replied: "A good ball club." I see a parallel between baseball and church here. If I am a good pastor (I know there may be varying opinions on this), you all have a lot to do with it. It has been and continues to be one of the great honors of my life to be your pastor.

WORSHIP IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Now, moving on. The second thing I want to point out from this Scripture is what a typical synagogue service was like. The New Testament doesn't go into great detail about what took place in a synagogue service, but from Jewish traditions we can get an idea of the general flow of their worship. It included singing from the Psalms, which were the worship songs of the congregation, especially Psalms 145-150. The worship songs were followed by the Affirmation of Faith from the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6, which begins: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one" (6:4). Next came the Eighteen Benedictions, known as the *Tefillah*, which were recited in succession. After this came the reading of Scripture, first from the Torah (the five books of Moses), and then a reading from one of the Prophets, which was followed by a sermon, given either by one of the men in the synagogue or by a visiting rabbi or teacher of the law. The service in the synagogue ended with the Aaronic blessing, the benediction pronounced by Aaron the high priest in Numbers 6:24-26, which I sometimes use at the close of Worship here at Faith. The words of the benediction, I hope, are familiar to you:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you
And be gracious to you;
The LORD turn His face toward you
And give you peace.

THE REACTION

Though the synagogue in Nazareth was Jesus' "home church," He was greeted on this occasion with a mixture of enthusiasm and curiosity. The people in His hometown had heard how He was "wow"-ing people in the other towns and villages of Galilee, and they were eager to see Him in action and hear Him for themselves.

Word had spread that Jesus was back in town and would be at "church" that Sabbath day. So, in all likelihood, the synagogue was packed with family members, friends, and townspeople. Jesus was invited to read from the scroll of the Prophets and to give a message to the congregation. He read, as Luke tells us, from Isaiah 61, with a bit of Isaiah 58 thrown in for good measure. It was a Messianic passage. It announced the ministry of the long-awaited

Messiah. When He finished reading, Jesus sat down (which was the traditional posture for a preacher or teacher in the synagogue). Then Jesus stunned the congregation with what may be the most arresting opening line in the history of preaching: “Today,” He said, “this scripture” – the passage He had just read – “has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). *The Message* paraphrase says: “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.”

Well, can you imagine? Can you believe He said that? Who in the world does this young man think He is? Isn’t He the carpenter? Isn’t He the son of Joseph and Mary? Haven’t we known Him since He was just knee-high to a grasshopper? Didn’t He grow up here in Nazareth? Didn’t He go swimming with all the other kids in town? Didn’t we cheer for Him on the soccer field? Didn’t we wave to Him when He rode by on His bike? He speaks so well – who knew that He could speak like that? There is an unmistakable grace in the way He talks. Where did that come from?

How in the world can He suggest that this Scripture He read is about *Him*? Does He seriously want us to believe that *He* is the fulfillment of this prophecy? Does He seriously want us to believe that *He* is the Messiah we’ve been waiting for? This carpenter from right here in Nazareth?

Come on, man!

When they listened to Jesus speak, the congregation in Nazareth was impressed, but not persuaded. They were amazed, but skeptical. It all sounded so good, but they couldn’t figure out how to fit His ancestry (as they thought they knew it) with the claims He was making.

I suppose that is still true in the lives of a lot of people today. Lots of people may be impressed with Jesus, even amazed by Him in one way or another. But they remain unpersuaded. They remain stuck in their skepticism. Maybe even proud of it. They hold Jesus in high regard, but are not willing to cross the line from unbelief to trusting faith, not willing to surrender their will to the sovereignty of Jesus, not willing to accept Him for who He is as the true Son of God, Savior of sinners, and Lord of all things.

Thabiti Anyabwile, who pastors a church in the Anacostia section of Washington, DC, and sits on the Council of The Gospel Coalition says: “It’s dishonoring Jesus to call Him something less than He really is. Muslims say they honor Jesus as a great prophet, but they dishonor Him by denying He is the Son of God. Hindus say they honor Jesus by worshiping Him as one of thousands of gods, but they dishonor Him by not seeing that He is the only true God and that all others are idols. Some people think they honor Jesus by saying, ‘He is a good moral teacher,’ but they dishonor Him by refusing to see He is the Savior of the world” (T. Anyabwile, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke*, 81).

His words remind me of the famous words of C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. If these words are familiar to you, it won’t hurt you to hear them again. Lewis said: “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one

thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*).

Are you persuaded that Jesus really is who He says He is – God in flesh and blood, the Savior of sinners, the chosen Messiah who came to rescue sinners from the wrath of God and to make us trophies of God’s grace? Have you stepped across the line of faith? If not, there is no day like today to take that step.

There is more for us to explore in this passage, but I urge you with all my heart to take to heart the message God has spoken to you from His Word today, and to devote yourself to Him in an ever-deepening faith and grateful love.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.