



First United Church of Oak Park

Hometown, Humanity and Hope

Luke 4:14-24

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This passage from Luke is an example of one of the most authentic human struggles Jesus experienced: attempting to be seen and taken seriously by the village that raised him, attempting to establish his authority as a religious leader and prophet.

“No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” – the fact that Jesus says this, tells me that he had a typical childhood, lived a rather normal, unremarkable life in the in-between time following his birth and before the start of his ministry. And to those who witnessed Jesus’s reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he was merely the son of Joseph, a local carpenter. Sure, he had grown in many ways, but in their eyes, he would always be that young boy, who lived down the road, who played with their own children, and grew up just like them.

I like to imagine Jesus was a precocious child, kind, pensive, having a proclivity for some mischief, studious, faithful, but extremely curious, perhaps to a fault, for how can someone who grew up to challenge the religious and political systems of his time not have been a child with challenging questions and a desire to figure things out for himself?

“No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown”: this is a common theme in literature and movies, like in Thomas Wolfe’s novel, *You Can’t Go Home Again*. Because it is our origins: our hometown, our family unit, our communities, that shape and raise us, forming the foundations of our identity and worldview, but at some point, there comes a time when a shift occurs and our identity and worldview continue to be shaped, but by outside forces and experiences, often causing a rift. This can make it difficult to return home and be taken seriously, or to reconcile your new worldview with that of which you were raised.

I can see how this could easily happen. In studying and working toward becoming a pastor, it has become evident that I will not pastor at my home church. Either those in my home church might struggle to see me as a pastoral figure, or I might begin to feel self-conscious and doubt my abilities, but either way, I will never be as authentic or effective in a pastoral role at my home church as I would elsewhere.

It's passages like this one that I find easy to enjoy. They are comfortable to me, I can understand and relate to it and to Jesus, these times when he appears most human.

I wonder if any of you have read or heard of *The Book of Longings* by Sue Monk Kidd. It's a work of fiction, published in 2020, which tells the story of Ana, a rebellious and ambitious woman in the first century, written in first person narrative, and Ana becomes the wife of Jesus.

Jesus is by no means a main character in the book. It is very clear that it is Ana's story, but I had no idea how hungry I was to know more about Jesus's life, until I read this book. It doesn't provide many answers to questions per se, but it does provide a context to let ourselves wonder, "what if?" and to take a creative glimpse at what Jesus might have been like before and between the limited passages we have, a glimpse into what kind of life he led.

I have often wondered what Jesus would have been like as a big brother, which he was to at least a couple of siblings. Was he protective? Did they ever ask him for advice? Did they bicker like many siblings? What kind of son was he to Mary, to Joseph? Did he have friends before disciples? What were those relationships like?

These wonderings, these questions are all an attempt to know Jesus better, to know God better. But they are all very human questions, for that is where our limits lie, as we are human ourselves. Trying to humanize God is all we are capable of if we are trying to understand or relate to God. But God is more than human, God is divine; but not just divine, God is both human and divine, a being, a power, a presence, that lives, exists, beyond our limits, beyond our comprehension. It can be frustrating or make us feel sad at times to feel like we don't know God very well, but then if we completely understood and knew God, if all our questions were answered and our wonderings put to rest, there would be no mystery, what would our faith be in? To reduce God to just human, makes that 'g' lowercase and minimizes who and what God is as well as what God is capable of.

For whatever limits we have, are not God's limit, for God is limitless

For whatever we know or think we know, God actually knows, for God knows it all.

For whatever good we can imagine, is the reality of God, for God is goodness and love.

I am grateful to have the life of Jesus to look to, to lean on, to learn from, to relate to in whatever small ways I can in our Scriptures. Yes, this passage is relatable and comfortable because it is such a human experience for Jesus, but

the last thing I would ever want to do is minimize God, to reduce God to just human. These are good and important passages, but I have found that it is the more difficult to understand, or challenging scriptures, that keep us wrestling, working on our relationship with God, that induce the desire to ask questions, to sift through our doubts, to grow as disciples and as a faith community. The mystery of our faith should be lifelong, keeping the 'g' in God capitalized, deepening our belief in God, a belief in something greater than humanity, a belief that gives us hope.

Hope is what we need. Far more than the need to humanize God is the need for the hope. A message of hope is what Jesus sought to impart that sabbath day in the synagogue in Nazareth...

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
She has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus is still speaking. These words are meant for you, for me, for our world, for all time. May you hear these words and know that hope. May you steep yourself in the mystery of God, deepening your faith, and belief in our God who is love, limitless, and greater than humanity.

Thanks be to God. Amen.