

Sunday, 1/27/19

Sermon: Home Again

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It was eight years ago this week that I returned to the United States after visiting Guatemala. I had gone on this trip with a cohort of students from my seminary to fulfill a cross-cultural requirement for my degree. Guatemala was not my first choice. Although I had never been to Guatemala, I felt as though the trip would be so very familiar, that I would not learn much from it. I grew up amongst Spanish speakers and I wanted to be immersed in a culture in which I did not know the language. I wanted to go someplace farther away and much more exotic. I had hoped to go to India. However, due to rescheduling, and the trajectory of my degree program, I was unable to go to India. So, Guatemala it would be. The impact of that time of travel, exploration, and learning, impacted me most when I returned home again. Returning to the United States had felt simultaneously so very familiar and so very foreign. Transformative experiences with God can be like that. I returned with new eyes that saw even the most basic things as being opulent compared to the poverty I had seen. I had returned with a new humility and quietness, because I had learned of the devastation of a country torn apart by a government that used its power to declare war on its own people. I had returned with a new found gratitude for my faith and for all those people who had shaped me in my faith. Coming home again was disorienting because I had been in another land and that was where I had been reoriented to God. Jesus in this scripture passage has been away from home for a while and while away, he has not only been centered on God, but he has been tempted by the devil. As part of his preparation for public ministry, the Gospel tells us that he had been fasting and praying in the desert wilderness before returning to his hometown of Nazareth, and it was there in the wild that he had encountered the temptations of Satan. But even before that, Jesus had been at the Jordan River where his cousin, John the Baptist, had baptized Jesus. And it is there in Jesus's baptism that the Spirit fell upon him like a dove from heaven and a voice was heard saying, "You are my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And so what we might notice in this telling of Jesus's early ministry is that Jesus undergoes a cycle of acceptance and rejection that will eventually take him to the cross in crucifixion and resurrection. In the literary world, we might call this foreshadowing of things to come. You see, Jesus was fully accepted by the grace of God in his baptism, and you and I too are recipients of this grace. But also, when the Spirit fell upon Jesus, he received an anointing that would not let him go and that would change the world forever. The Spirit stayed with Jesus and even went before him, leading him into 40 days of prayer and fasting. In doing so, He became physically weak, but full of spiritual strength. It is with this spiritual strength that he was able to resist the temptations that came to him in the wilderness. In his starvation, he was tempted to turn a stone into bread. It is written in scripture that the devil said to him, "Since you are God's son, command the stone to become a loaf of bread." And Jesus replied, "It is written, "People won't live by bread alone." He was then tempted twice more. In his weakness, Satan offered him power and when in danger from falling, Satan offered him safety, but he rebuked these too. Furthermore, it is good for us to learn from his experience that just because we can do a thing, doesn't mean we should do it. Because what Jesus had learned about himself

through temptation is that he had a hunger beyond what bread could satisfy, he had human frailty that relied on the power of the Spirit, and he had such a trust and confidence in God, that God need not prove anything to him. Through these temptations, Jesus was empowered and equipped by the Spirit to speak on behalf of God in a new way. His 40 day transformation in the wilderness set the stage for the life in ministry that was to come. And by accepting the Spirit and by rejecting evil in the disguise of good, Jesus was ready to preach his first sermon back at home. And what I can only imagine to be a mic drop moment for Jesus, we get a one line sermon: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Boom. That's it. God's will is fulfilled - when the poor receive good news - when the captives are released from bondage - when the blind can see again - when the oppressed are set free - when jubilee year is here And for Jesus, that time is in this very moment. Today this scripture is fulfilled! Today when the poor hear: "You don't have to be poor." That's good news! And the thing is, this news isn't really new at all—it's as old as time itself, but we do not listen to it. Even worse is calling God's good news, "Fake news." You don't have to be poor! You can be released from the bondage that ties you up! You can open your eyes to see in new ways! Yes, you can be liberated from the oppressive forces against you Because the year of the lord, the year of jubilee is here today. Jesus makes it so. And while our sermon from Jesus is just one line today, it has an entire world packed up in it. 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Have you heard it? Have you heard where Jesus has been? He has been with both the Spirit and the devil in a desert place and the Spirit won out. He has attended to the ordinances of God in a desert place. He has fasted, and prayed, and given glory to God. He has been throughout history in places where people thirst for righteousness and God's justice has come to pass. And now in His preaching to us today, Jesus proclaims the year of God's favor not to just some, but to ALL. And let me tell you, that is a huge threat to some. Some who would like to keep others in their place. Some who benefit from the poor remaining poor. Some who want things for you that you may not want for yourself. Because you see, our ego gets in the way of what we think is right for other people. What is good and right for me, may not be good and right for you. And so we've got to figure it out together..And the way we do that is by listening to Jesus. And listening to one another. God's favor for a person, for a people, a community, a nation and a world, only happens when we have welcomed God into the very fiber of our being as Jesus has. I mean, if you aren't going to attend upon the ordinances of God, such as prayer, fasting, study of scriptures, and worship, what good is your faith going to do? When we hear Jesus say that the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing it is because we actually heard something! We hear the cries of those who are suffering. We hear the shouts of joy from those who have found new life in Christ. We hear the echos of the martyrs of the past who have sacrificed their own lives for the greater good. We hear the clarion call to do better. When we hear Jesus say that the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing it is because we have come to an understanding what it is God wants for us and our world! In that fulfillment, of scripture we have come home again to God! And in that coming home again, back to ourselves, back to our families, back to God. Amen.