

# **Christ in Our Midst**

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young  
Presented on Sunday, January 31, 2010**

## **Sermon Prayer:**

Please pray with me. Gracious God we thank you for your word that dwells richly in our midst. We pray as always when we enter this place that you would open our eyes and open our ears that we might see and hear you, that you would open our hearts that we might receive you, and strengthen our hands and feet that we might serve you. And so as you speak to us this day Lord, strengthen us, inspire us, fill us with your holy presence that we may truly live as your children in the course of this week. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

## **Sermon:**

Well, it's a heck of a scripture reading to come home to on after vacation. To hear this wonderful lesson from Luke about Jesus going to his home town and here I am again back in my home town at my home church, but I'm not Jesus so we don't need to worry about that side of it.

Actually, I believe God called me to be a pastor first and a preacher second and somewhere along the way occasionally the prophetic voice does come out. But typically the prophetic voice is occasionally rare with me, so if I err it's going to be on the side of being pastoral and being caring toward people and gently helping people see where God's Holy Spirit might be leading us. So not as dramatic as what Jesus proposed that day in the synagogue in Nazareth, and I hope by the end of our sermon today you might understand just how radical his thinking and his teaching was that day.

But, what would we do if Jesus walked in here today? What would we do? What would we say to him? What would we hope that he would say to us? What would

Jesus do if he walked in and saw all of us here, and stepped up into this pulpit and started to share God's word with us?

I think first we would greet Jesus with smiles, with hand shakes, with open arms – if we recognized him, that is. If we knew indeed that Jesus had come into our sanctuary I think we would embrace him. And we might even share our words of deepest gratitude for all that he has done for us and for the world. I believe, if we knew that Jesus had walked into our sanctuary, we would celebrate. We would celebrate with each other, we would celebrate with Jesus; we would celebrate with our God if we recognized that Jesus was worshipping with us right now.

And I think once we had welcomed him and once we had done some celebrating we would want to hear what Jesus had to say to us. I think we would just like the people of Nazareth offer to him the opportunity to stand before us to open the scriptures, and to read the scripture perhaps that is most near and dear to his heart, to share that with us and then to help us understand what that scripture reading means for us today.

And I believe that we probably would expect to hear from Jesus how we have failed him as well as how we have faithfully served him in our daily walk of faith. I think we would expect an honest appraisal of who we are as a church, who we are as a congregation. We would expect Jesus to lift up those moments where in the leading of God's spirit we have had successes for God's kingdom. And I do think that we would need to hear the words of challenge from our Savior, saying these are the times when you miss the mark. You didn't quite get it right and here's how you might want to consider approaching that.

I think we would expect Jesus to tell us we're basically good people; and I think he would commend us for trying to live as good moral honest people in this world. I think he would commend us for trying to embody in our lives the values of God that we come to this place to remember to embrace and that shape our lives. I think we would expect him to say, and I think he would say, that we're doing pretty well at loving people the way God loves us. There's room for

improvement, but I think he would give us some words of encouragement and commendation.

When Jesus visited his home town in Nazareth so long ago, he was welcomed at first by the people of Nazareth. In fact, you can almost imagine word spreading through that small town saying, "Jesus has returned. The carpenter's son is here; the boy who was raised by Mary and Joseph and ran in these streets and played in these yards. The boy who sat with the elders to hear their instructions; Jesus has come back to town. And it's the Sabbath. Everyone, come to synagogue. Come and see our hometown boy come back a man." And I'm sure that even though this was at the very beginning of his ministry, word had already gotten out of some of the things that Jesus was doing, like the healings, some of the miracles that were occurring wherever Jesus visited. And so, many gathered hoping to see those miracles and to hear the words of instruction that had inspired so many. And so you can imagine the synagogue that day was filled. It was filled with people ready to welcome home a man who had grown up as a boy in their midst; filled with people hoping to hear that things are ok; that God is on our side and that we're going to be lifted up and be a great community and a great synagogue.

And so it's no wonder when he came into the sanctuary it would be like if the bishop came into our church today, the first thing I would say to Bishop Devadhar would be, "Would you please preach?" Knowing Bishop Devadhar, he would say, "No, I've come to hear you preach." And then the pressure is on. But the rabbi was off the hook that day. The rabbi didn't have to teach in Jesus' presence. And in fact, the task of teaching fell to Jesus. And the synagogue, just like we have a rotation of readings - scripture readings that cover three years, so too the synagogue had a rotation of scripture readings call a lectionary (we call it a lectionary) and it just so happened that day the reading was from Isaiah. I don't think that was a coincidence. I think Jesus knew exactly what the reading would be that day from Holy Scripture. And I think he knew that he had to be in Nazareth that day to expound upon that particular reading from Holy Scripture.

So don't think there's any sort of accidental, mystical way, that oh, it just so happened that day that Jesus was there and it just so happened - I think Jesus was very intentional about being in Nazareth that day with that particular reading. And I also know, or at least believe I should say, that Jesus knew he was going to get in trouble. I think he knew it. I think he knew that he was going to rattle people's cages.

It's interesting, our adult Sunday school class this morning, I came in about two thirds of the way through class I think, and they were discussing this very reading. And so there were some comments when I walked into the room. And I know one of the closing comments when the class was over was, "Well you've got your task ahead of you, these people know the readings now." In fact Cindy I think was pointing that out to me. "Good luck preaching today."

I believe Jesus knew exactly what he was doing that day, and I believe that he knew that he was going to stir the pot for a number of people that day in Nazareth.

When Jesus points to the ministry of the prophet Elijah and speaks about the widow in Zarephath of Sidon, who was helped by the prophet Elijah in a time of drought and famine in Israel. What got the people so angry about that was that God had sent the prophet to a non-Jew. God had sent the prophet to someone who was not of the House of Israel. And God brought that prophet to that widow in Zarephath so that she and her son might not die because the oil had run out, the flour had run out. And she was going that day when Elijah met this woman, she was going to make her last little cake that she and her son might eat their last meal together and die. God sent Elijah to a non-Jew to bring salvation to that house.

It was enough. If Jesus had stopped there, it was enough because the people of Nazareth had to be furious with this. But Jesus didn't stop there. He then went on to share how Elisha was in Israel another prophet of God, the one who had received Elijah's mantle. He was in Israel and a non-Jew Assyrian, Namaan was brought by God to Israel to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. This no, not any old guy, Namaan was a military commander. And he was led by God to Israel to

Elisha to be cured of his leprosy which had become a public embarrassment for him in Syria. And Jesus is saying to the people, "Think of how many lepers there were in Israel at the time of Elisha and this non-Jew came to Israel, this military commander, this man who was part of the regime that threatened the peace, the people of Israel. Was brought to Israel to be healed of his leprosy and restored by the prophet Elisha.

Think of how many widows and their children in the time of Elijah must of died because of that famine. Think of how many good synagogue-going, law-abiding people must have suffered and died during that great famine, and here God sends his prophet to non-Jewish territory to enter the house of a non-Jew to bring life and salvation.

You know, Jesus did not die on the cross to save the people of the United Methodist Church. Well, he did die to save us, but he died to save more than us. Jesus did not die on the cross just to save those of us who are in this sanctuary right now. Jesus did not die on the cross to save the names of those on our membership roles. Jesus died on the cross to save all of humanity. The good people that are inside of the community of faith and the people who are outside that community yet waiting to hear the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And Jesus was trying to help his home community to see that they had a mission beyond the walls of their synagogue and beyond the boundaries of Nazareth. Their mission was outside of the territory of Northern Israel. It was outside of the boundaries of the nation of Israel. It was outside of the Mediterranean region. It embraced the whole world. Jesus came to tell us that we, by virtue of our faith, the faith that God has planted in our hearts, that we are the light of the world, and that we are the salt of the earth. And if we just keep it inside these walls like the good people of Nazareth wanted to do to say we've got the answer, we've got God right here and we're not letting him go. We're missing the whole point of the Gospel. And my guess is that grieved Jesus' heart more than anything that day in Nazareth. Because the people that not only loved him

into life were the same people that he loved and they didn't understand. They didn't get it.

And maybe that's why at the end of this story when the crowd that had gathered to hear this hometown boy make good as a man had been transformed into a mob ready to kill him. Maybe, just maybe in the middle of that as they get him to the edge of the cliff, ready to throw him off, maybe the community came to their senses. And they realized what they were about to do and Jesus was allowed to leave town without a scratch.

I wonder whatever happened to those people. I wonder whatever happened to the good people of Nazareth because we don't hear much more about them, if anything. But I'd like to think that that day their lives were transformed by the very love of God. I guess that's because I like happy endings. But I'd like to think that that mob gone crazy and seeing nothing but red, I'd like to think that they came to their senses and they finally heard the promise of God's Kingdom.

In the beginning of this sermon I asked "What would we do if Jesus walked into our church?" And for me the reality is Jesus is always here. He's here every time we gather. He's here even when this place is empty. Jesus is here. And he looks at us and loves us with the love of God and he hopes that somewhere along the way we will get the Good News message not only that God loves us, but that God loves all of us – all of us. And God's biggest hope is that we will love each other the way God loves us because that is the love that transforms. That is the love that changes everything about us and about the world.

So today, as you hear this reading of scripture, I hope that you will come to see Jesus here in our midst. You'll hear what he has to say and you'll let his words that come from his heart transform your life for the Kingdom of God.

Amen.