

This past week, I had the distinct honor to serve as the chaplain at Camp Henry, the summer camp ministry of our Diocese of Western North Carolina and one of the great evangelical ministries I have ever been a part of. Some of you may know that I have spent most of my life as a part of this special program. I've been a camper, counselor, outdoor school instructor, Camp Director, parent, and basically filling out the bingo board of camp roles, now a chaplain. It was a complete blessing to return to a place that I consider "home" in many ways to provide spiritual guidance to the children and staff at that incredibly holy and magical place. You can ask any number of our younger members who have attended Camp Henry and I reckon they will agree with me that in many ways, going to camp feels like going "home".

It was a bit strange for me to go back to Camp Henry this week having embodied almost all the roles one can. The directors and staff now were children that I knew when I was in charge. Many of the campers are children of people who I grew up with or children from our church. Also, being at camp this past week brought up a myriad of memories and emotions for me. Camp is after all where I found my faith. It is where I fell in love with Sallie, my wife. Camp is where I developed friendships that are still amongst the deepest in my life.

Camp is where we were and where we were surrounded by love when my mother-in-law tragically passed away eleven years ago, and also where we were when our first child, Nora, was born nearly ten years ago. I witnessed peace and conflict, joy and sadness, love and transformation, creativity and destruction, and a 6'3, 215 pound 20 year old human dressed as an Oompa Loompa. It was glorious and I could not be more proud of the people who run this special program. Ask any child from our church who has attended Camp Henry and the smile that comes to their face will tell you basically all you need to know.

The focus of my work with the campers and staff this week was similar to the work that we do here at St. John in the Wilderness, namely, the steps we take to build Christian community. Camp is an excellent opportunity to practice these steps and although I served in a role distinctly different than any I've served there before, in so many ways it felt like going "home" to me. The songs that are sung, the ridiculous line dances we dance, the games, rituals, and overall sense of belonging remind me so much of the time that I spent at Camp Henry that shaped and formed the person who stands before you today.

Although camp is not a “town” or “village” in the traditional sense, going back there feels like going “home” in many ways and it caused me to reflect on what it might have felt like for our Lord and Savior Jesus to return to his hometown in the midst of his earthly journey.

Our Gospel lesson from Mark today invites us to think about going back “home”. Think about where you grew up or where you consider your “hometown” to be. A hometown can communicate comfort and security. There is something about driving on well-traveled streets, of walking into a grocery store or restaurant and seeing people you know or who know your parents and cannot believe how much you’ve grown. There can be profound warmth in such a familiar world.

Sometimes, though, hometowns are less the stuff of dreams than they are of nightmares. Hometowns can trigger instances of deep trauma, resurrecting decades-old anxieties. Maybe the memories of your hometown are not comforting at all. Maybe they’re pockmarked by past mistakes or dismissed for your crazy lifestyle or political beliefs. Maybe your hometown is the place you first looked evil in the eyes, where you were ostracized for who you knew yourself to be or what you wanted to do with your life or whom you loved.

Hometowns conjure up all kinds of memories and emotions. Over the years, they become saturated with profound import and meaning and can even take on a life of their own. Hometowns can be lifegiving and heart-rending and everything in between. Today, our gospel text from Mark recounts Jesus returning to his hometown with his disciples along with him. And for all the pleasant moments that might have brought to his mind, there were, we hear, some pretty significant challenges.

The gospels don't give us much on Jesus' upbringing; his family picture albums seem pretty sparse after the wise men depart from the inn. But based on a handful of textual clues, it is safe to assume that Mary and Joseph were devout Jews who trusted in God's plan and provision, and that Jesus would have been the beneficiary of such a faithful upbringing. Remember that scene where adolescent Jesus is at the synagogue for three days, sitting amidst the religious leaders, peppering them with questions? Take that and run with it. Let your imagination fill in the gaps of his formative years.

Nearly twenty years later, Jesus sets out from his home, invites all sorts of people to accompany him, and begins his formal ministry. He's seen all over the place, traveling in and out of homes and villages and cities around the Galilee, teaching and healing and calling others to a new sort of life. Along the way, Jesus utters some cryptic sayings about the kingdom of God and near-blasphemous statements about his relationship to God. Throughout Mark's gospel, he tells those who witness these things not to speak, for fear that their testimonies will fall into the wrong hands.

But word spreads, as word tends to do, and people flock to Jesus, either for their own sakes or for the sake of another. Some want to be made well in body or soul. Others, it seems, want to see a miracle with their own two eyes. In Mark 5, immediately before our text today, crowds congregate to glimpse Jesus casting out demons in the land of the Gerasene's. Others attend to him raising the daughter of a synagogue official and healing a woman with a blood disorder. Jesus has been busy, and away from home, but the road now leads him back to Nazareth.

Surely Nazareth was a place of some comfort for Jesus. Surely it held smells and sights and sounds that forced him to stop and think of playing in the dusty alleys or sitting down to a Sabbath meal with his family. But whatever nostalgia flooded back was quickly stemmed by a demon of a different sort; Jesus names it as a lack of faith, a collective inability to see the hand of God at work because of past assumptions: “Where did this man get all this? . . . 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?”

“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”

If a hometown is a comfortable place, it's understandable why a prophet would not be welcome there. Prophets are not dictated by comfort or custom but driven by divine obligation. Hometowns are places often bound, sometimes paralyzed, by precedent. Prophets come to unsettle, to startle a people into new ways of seeing the world, and to demand them cease their spiritual backsliding. Hometowns occasionally toe the line of the status quo. Prophets disrupt the status quo, speaking light and life into the creeping darkness of what has come to be “normal” or “natural”.

Thinking about a hometown is an exercise in thinking about the complexity of being human, our myriad, everyday habits—some good, some not so good. It's about appreciating the intricate beauties of a place we've called home for years. But it's also about shrewd ways we insulate our lives from failure, from fear, from "those people." What are the hometowns we have created for ourselves? Where are the places of comfort that have brought us grace? Where are the sealed-off places where we are doing our best to insulate ourselves and curate a nice, clean life, untouched by those we deem filthy?

It's understandable why we would be hesitant to let Jesus into either one of these spaces. Why would we want to disrupt that which is good and cozy, especially in a world where good news can be hard to come by? Alternatively, why would we allow ourselves to be stretched and challenged, for our lives to be undone, willingly, with all the awkwardness and unease that can bring?

Jesus says, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

It is uncomfortable to let a prophet's presence wreak havoc in the corners of your heart, in your own house, among your own people. But letting God speak into what we think of as the warmest, coziest places of our lives might increase our souls' capacity for love—for both God and our neighbors. If we allow Jesus' prophetic presence to sink in, something like scales might well fall from our eyes, encouraging us to see those who were, for the longest time, invisible. We might start to witness walls of hostility and division come down or cease to be built in the first place. We might learn to welcome those whom we, at one time, labeled "unsafe" or "other" or "criminal".

What might it look like for us to be disrupted by Jesus the prophet here and now? There are no simple answers here; each person's life is different and each person experiences grace and healing uniquely. But I would wager that it would look like taking stock of "how things have always been done" and exploring how the church can proclaim and enact hope in transformative ways. Opening ourselves, our communities, our neighborhoods, and our nation to such a prophet is not easy. But doing so can bring about beautiful fruit and leave us, like those in the synagogue, "astounded" at God's words and works. *Amen.*