

Proper 9B, July 4, 2021, St. Anne's

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2–10; Mark 6:1–13

Galilee was definitely **not** the place to be from if you wanted to be important. The saying was, 'Can *anything good* come out of Galilee'. And Nazareth ... well Nazareth wasn't even the best place in *Galilee*. Just a little ho-hum no-whereville in a back-water of the world. And the people there knew it. So, I'm sure they were surprised when rumours started about the things Jesus was up to. Travelling around with a band of followers, preaching and teaching. They heard he'd healed some sick people. There were even those who thought **he** might be the long-awaited Messiah. But these hometown people knew better! After all, he was just a boy from Nazareth. And *nobody* important would **ever** come from **Nazareth!**

That Sabbath when he was back in town they wouldn't have been surprised when he stood up to speak in the synagogue - after all, any man over the age of 13 had a right to do *that*. But they *were* astonished by what he said. Indeed, more than just astonished... Mark tells us, they *were offended* - just who did he think he was?

This kind of wisdom couldn't come from a boy who had grown up **here** and whose parents and brothers and sisters they all knew. And so, they closed their hearts and minds and rejected him. It was inconceivable to them that God could be at work in the commonplace. That God was working in someone they *knew*.

I'm sure Mark included this story of the inability of Jesus' home-town neighbours to accept him as a way to remind *us* that God doesn't work according to the world's standards. Jesus was outside the expectations of the people of Nazareth. Which gave them a choice - they could open their minds and hearts to see God at work in the unexpected. Or, they could close their minds and hearts and buy into the prevailing wisdom that nothing good *could* ever come from an insignificant

little town like theirs. Mark tells us they **chose** to reject Jesus rather than open themselves to the reality that God was working in an unexpected way.

Now, it may seem strange to **us** that they rejected Jesus' ministry and wisdom. Or at the least that they weren't proud of the 'home town boy makes good' angle. In part that's a cultural difference between Jesus' day and our own. Witherington writes, "Notice that they neither dispute that he *has* wisdom or that he performs mighty works; they are just dumbfounded that it comes from a hometown boy like Jesus. More than just a matter of familiarity breeding contempt, this comes from the ancient mentality that geographical and heredity origins determine who a person *is* and what his capacities will *always* be. They see Jesus as someone who is not merely exceeding expectations but rather is overreaching." In other words, they think he's trying to be 'too big for his britches' to use another folk saying. He's trying to **be** something he *can't possibly be*.

But **we** shouldn't feel smug, because we're not so very different. This story isn't just about how some villagers rejected Jesus 2000 years ago - it's also about how we ignore and reject him today. Oh, sure, we believe in Jesus. After all, you're here listening to me when we could all be doing something else. **We** don't have any problem with the idea that a boy from Nazareth could be someone very special. But that's because for **us** Nazareth is the special place *Jesus* is from, not the ordinary one we live in. And we know the rest of the story. But just like the people of Nazareth, we often still have trouble **really** trusting that God is at work in **our** life and world. Jesus asks us to believe that "nothing will be impossible with God," not in our lives, not in our church - no matter what the obstacles may seem to be. But faced with the idea that God is active in **our** lives, we easily fall into the same trap as they did in Nazareth. It's easy to think, "God isn't going to do

something amazing **here**. *We're* not important or particularly noteworthy. We're too young, too old, too rich, too poor, too busy. Not busy enough. If God is going to do something amazing it'll be somewhere else - not here. Not to *us*."

And if we let ourselves fall into that trap, it could well be written of *us*, "He could do no deed of power there." Not because God doesn't *have* the power, but because our own *fear* can prevent us from *accepting* it in our life.

I think we assume that when Mark says Jesus could do no deeds of power in Nazareth it's because their lack of belief somehow blocked his ability to perform miracles. Implying that if they had just *believed* in him, he could have done a great deal more. But the majority of miracles that Mark relates in his gospel don't involve *any* particular faith on the part of the recipients. So maybe the people's lack of faith in him didn't *block* his power. But simply resulted in them not bothering to seek Jesus' help in the first place. They didn't bring their sick for healing. They didn't bring their children for his blessing. They didn't come to listen to his teaching. Faith implies **action**. Without faith in Jesus, the people **did** nothing. And so, they gained **nothing**.

And that, of course, is equally, and sadly true for us too. If we don't seek God's help, if we don't step out and *risk* in the faith that Jesus *will* bless our ministry, then we gain nothing. It's often said that many Christians are "functional atheists" - meaning that although we believe in God, on a practical level we live our life and **function** as though there *were* no God. We **act** as if everything depends on us alone and God has no part in what happens. We don't try to 'discern' what God is up to and join in – we just try to power through everything on the basis of our own ideas and plans. And that lack of *active* faith, that lack of **trust** in *God* as an active

participant in our life and ministry keeps us from reaping as many blessings as God could otherwise give us. As Williamson writes in his commentary, “The spiritual climate of a congregation, its sense of expectancy, its openness to the power of God at work through Jesus Christ, will in fact have a great deal to do with how much God's power can accomplish in that particular community. Our unbelief does not render God impotent, but when it is dominant in a congregation its dampening effect on the mighty acts of God in that time and place is evident and sad.”ⁱ

Fear and functional disbelief are the easy route in our culture. Living as if we really don't think God is active in our life may seem on the surface like the safe way to do things. But, perhaps all that really gets us is... nothing. Perhaps, we're being called to risk following paths that *aren't* safe, predictable and secure in the budget. Perhaps we are being called to a lifestyle of more radical vulnerability, dependence, weakness and *trust*. Of prayer rather than *just* action. Of listening for the voice of God in our midst, rather than trying to simply power our way towards our definition of 'success'.

Just like the people of Nazareth, **we** have a *choice*. What might happen if we *chose* to open our minds and hearts to the presence of God already in our midst. What might happen if we trusted that God **is** supporting us and thus focused on what we *can* do rather than at what we fear we *can't*? What blessings might God be able to give us if we opened ourselves to the power of God working *through* us and our community? Maybe... we should try to find out.

ⁱ *Mark*, Interpretation Commentaries, pp. 116-117