

We'll begin this morning with Mark's story about Jesus and his hometown flop in Nazareth. It's a curious little story, at once both unexpected and predictable. There is, in our cultural heritage, the well-established and much-beloved image of the hometown hero, the kid who makes good and brings reflected glory on all in his or her neighborhood, village, town or province. Bruce Springsteen reminds us that we all love the local hero, "Somebody with the right style... (a) local hero, somebody with just the right smile." Of course, if our local hero doesn't have just the right style, just the right smile, then there is also the deeply engrained notion of just how quickly that erstwhile champion can fall out of favor. Professional sports is famous for this paradigm, the athlete with local roots acquired by his or her hometown team to great rejoicing by the fans, only to fail miserably when time for actual performance comes. Soon the fans are calling for the team to get rid of the bum. Richie Sexson is coming perilously close to living down to this story with the Mariners.

Unlike that staggering sports hero, though, Jesus hometown performance doesn't really vary from what's made him the toast of Galilee, at least not initially. Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus preached that day, but Luke does, in chapter 4 of his Gospel, and it's the same thing that Mark tells us he's been preaching all along: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus has come home to bring the Good News, that through turning away from old habits of sin and brokenness, his neighbors can experience the blessings of God's Kingdom.

Their reaction is, in many ways, predictable, although it seems to have caught Jesus at least partially by surprise. The Children of Israel did not, after all, have a great track record of listening to their own prophets, as Jesus ruefully comments. Our lectionary passage from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning contains part of Yahweh's call to the prophet Ezekiel and Yahweh's warning to Ezekiel that he may be ignored despite his divine calling and filling by the Spirit. Sometimes, it doesn't matter if the news is good. If it upsets the status quo, some people are not going to want to hear it.

Of course, we don't really need divine revelation to suspect that Jesus may not get a good hearing. It's easy to discount even the best advice from those we know or think we know well, especially if there is something in their past or their present that we don't think they can overcome. And the people of Nazareth think they know all about Jesus. "Well, to begin with, he's just a carpenter," they say. He's not a rabbi, he hasn't had special training, he's just a guy who works with his hands. The Greek word is τεκνον, the same root that gives us our word technician. I'm reminded of the dismissive attitude that actors, dancers and singers, the "talent" in the performing arts, often take toward the hard working artists who create sets, props, and costumes and who manipulate lights and sound. "O, she's just a techie, what does she know?" "Isn't this Mary's son?" the people of Nazareth ask. Note that they don't call him Joseph's son, as would have been traditional. Apparently, the peculiarity of Jesus' birth has not been forgotten in this little town. In small town America, the question might be, pardon the expression, "Who does this little bastard think he is?" In Nazareth, Jesus will always be that baby that didn't belong to his mother's husband. Moral advice from such a one seemed absurd to the self-

righteous and complacent, who would, of course, visit the assumed sins of the mother upon the child.

And so, Jesus did what good he could in his old home. A few seemed to have trusted him and his message enough to come to him for healing, and then he moved on to other villages in the area. He also entered into a new phase in his ministry, for the first time sending out twelve of his disciples as his surrogates, to teach and to heal those he could not reach. Their message was to be the same as his, “Repent and believe the Good News.” This week, I came across a wonderful set of insights into that message from a theologian in England named Lawrence Moore. Moore can relate in a very personal way to the liberating nature of repentance and Good News. As a young Christian in his native Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, Moore began his professional career in the late 1970s as a detective with the Rhodesian Special Branch specializing in political and military intelligence, working against the move towards majority rule. Taking up theological studies afterwards, he came face to face with just how he had served the forces of what he calls “white supremacy, repression and torture, colonialism and the haves at the expense of the have-nots” rather than working in the spirit of the liberating Christ he had claimed to serve. On the message of Jesus and his disciples, Moore writes, “The Good News is the drawing near of the kingdom of God in Jesus. But the kingdom comes not as judgment so much as promise: “Here is the possibility of a new world! Repent – leave behind the old ways and ties; the old shackles that bind you to death and despair. Become part of the new world!” It’s a call not to grovel but to reach out and embrace God’s gift – a gift that is entirely gracious. It’s a summons to God’s new future, rather than a recall to a more blameless past. Jesus’ call is life-giving and freeing, while so much Christian preaching seems to bind people in shackles of guilt and unworthiness. That, at least, is the popular perception, and if it’s wrong, it’s because we haven’t communicated the Good News! Here is a message of repentance that is positive. It necessarily means changing and leaving old ways behind – but for positive reasons, rather than beating people over the head with how bad they are.”

In sending out the twelve with this message of Good News, Jesus gives them explicit instruction on what to take with them – only the necessities. He sends them with the clothes on their backs and feet and with their walking sticks, a necessity not only for comfortable and efficient walking in the hills but also for protection against beasts both four-footed and two-footed in the sometimes wild terrain. They are not to take extra food or money – they will rely upon the hospitality to which God enjoined the nation of Israel. Neither are they to take a begging bag as the wandering philosophers who were common to the area did. They will be grateful recipients of others’ hospitality but they will not appear to be taking advantage of it, to be grasping for material gain. These instructions from Jesus continued to be followed by itinerant preachers of the Way long after their Master’s ascension. The Didache, or Teaching of the Apostles, a manual of Christian instruction written sometime between A.D. 70 and 160, has this to say about traveling preachers: “But concerning the apostles and prophets, so do ye according to the ordinance of the Gospel. Let every apostle, when he cometh to you, be received as the Lord; but he shall not abide more than a single day, or if there be need, a second likewise; but if he abide three days, he is a false prophet. And when he departeth let the apostle receive nothing save bread, until he findeth shelter; but if he ask money, he is a false prophet.” Matthew’s gospel records that Jesus adds one more necessity they are to take – their brains. “Be wise as serpents

but gentle as doves,” Jesus tells them. Trust in God and humans and go in peace, in other words, but use the brains God gave you.

It’s worth remembering that in sending out the Twelve, Jesus wasn’t sending out some sort of well-trained, highly qualified God Squad. These were not men whose very appearance would cause respect among the villages and hamlets to which they traveled. Jesus was just a carpenter and his followers were no more highly placed. Fishermen, for the most part, a rabble rousing activist in Simon the Zealot, a former collaborator in Matthew the publican. A cut below the average citizen, in fact, rather than a cut above. Nor were these men great paragons of faith. A quick review of the previous chapters of Mark’s gospel reveals the most recent recorded words that Jesus directed to his closest followers before he sent them out. It was the incident in the boat in the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Do you remember? “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Nothing marked these men for the success that Mark tells us they found in their efforts to proclaim the Good News and heal other than their willingness to go and Jesus faith in them.

Jesus sent the twelve as his surrogates to teach and heal in Galilee and, at his ascension, he told all of his gathered disciples that their job was to go, to teach, to baptize. That directive, the Great Commission, has not yet been rescinded. It is still the job of every disciple of Jesus to help spread good news for the poor, release for captives and sight to the blind. Now is the time of God’s favor and love for all humankind. Why are we sometimes reluctant to engage in this critical task? Often, I think, it is because we do not believe that we are suited or equipped. But then, neither were the twelve from all appearances. If we decide that we are incapable of following Jesus in taking the good news to those in need of it, then, as the Jesuit scholar John Kavanaugh remarks, “We reject not only the prophets around us. We reject the prophet within.” We have followed the leads of the villagers in Nazareth and of those hard-hearted Israelites about whom God warned Ezekiel. Of course, it’s easy to discount our own worth as messengers for the Holy One. We know ourselves most intimately, after all, and we know our own failings, shortcomings and flaws. “Maybe,” we say to ourselves, “if I’d lived a little better life, or if I’d been to seminary, or if I’d taken that public speaking class, then I could help proclaim the Good News.” A writer known as Symeon the New Theologian (a particularly long-lived nickname, given that he lived between AD 949-1022) put it this way: “Many people never stop saying—I have heard them myself—“If only we had lived in the days of the apostles, and been counted worthy to gaze upon Christ as they did, we should have become holy like them.” Such people do not realize that the Christ who spoke then and the Christ who speaks now throughout the whole world is one and the same.” We must not forget that our acceptance of God’s gift through Christ Jesus has made us fit not just to be God’s messengers, but God’s children, joint-heirs in the Kingdom with Christ. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul comments on his own feelings of inadequacy, his “thorn in the flesh.” He writes in chapter 12, “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Like Paul, when we take seriously our mandate to be witnesses for Christ and the Beloved Community of God in this world, we must deal not only with our own weaknesses but also with

insults and hardships, perhaps even persecutions and calamities. Is there any one of us who has been to meetings of the Lynnwood Planning Commission in the past year who doesn't recognize that, to paraphrase the old song from Hair and Three Dog Night, people still find it "Easy to be Hard" when it comes to caring about other people and social justice? The Lord's prediction to Ezekiel sounds very relevant, as do the words of the Psalmist: "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us for we have had our fill of derision. Our souls overflow with the mockery of those at ease and with the contempt of the proud." Nevertheless, we must persevere. As Paul recognized, even in our weakness, our message, the Good News, is strong and full of hope and healing for many. Though some would reject us and the Christ we proclaim, others will embrace our message of love and peace as exactly what they have needed.

Jesus sent out the twelve with the necessities of the job for their time while rejecting the crass commercialism of so many other itinerant preachers with whom their audience would have been familiar. What does this mean for us? What tools shall we use in our attempts to tell our community about the love of God for all the world? I believe that the congregational envisioning process that happened before my arrival made an inspired start to answering this question. Just as the apostles began their task with what they had at hand, so Good Shepherd has launched our future with what we have at hand. We have land and we have invited the community to use it with us. The Scriptures teach us the importance of allowing those without land to gather produce on ours as well as the blessings of the garden, so you have created community gardens. The Scriptures teach us to care for the widow and the poor, so you have begun the effort to build affordable senior housing. Because of the blessings of beautiful gardens and the importance of joyful community gatherings and weddings that the Scriptures show, you have planned an arboretum. Because Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me," you have planned for day care.

What else are our necessities, what else do we have at hand? How can we be "wise as serpents but gentle as doves" in our efforts to bring the Good News to our community? Our Outreach Taskforce is continuing to study ways in which we can act on Jesus' Great Commission in a way that is consonant with the character of our people and our community. Like the apostles, we will take seriously Jesus instructions to make use of the forms of communication that are familiar to our audience without resorting to base self-interest. For the Twelve, that meant traveling from village to village as did the other philosophers of the day but without a begging bag. For us, it will mean appropriating the public relations and marketing techniques some of us have learned in business, being careful not to cross the line into commercialism. I will be working with members of our congregation who have experience in such matters to assemble a coherent campaign of brochures, signage, electronic and traditional mailing pieces, website and perhaps even affordable advertising. You will be hearing more about this effort in days to come. One of our key first steps is to work with a professional design firm on a logo and typeface package that will define our "look" to the broader community. Joye Melby and Dale Sutton have agreed to work with me as a committee to guide the design firm, whose credits include similar work for Taproot Theatre, the Duwamish Indian Tribe, Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and the University of Washington. We invite any other members who are willing to put in the time necessary to join us in this task. The design firm in question, Ray Braun Design, have offered us a very affordable rate for this service, with an estimate of between \$800 and \$1300 for the job. I also invite any and all of you to join with me personally in contributing to a fund for this expense. I am placing

in the offering plate this morning my check for \$200. If you would like to contribute toward the remainder, please note "Logo project" on your check or envelope.

But this sermon is not about our logo project or our smartest efforts to get people to notice our church and hear our message. We are not bound by the cleverness of our methods or the beauty and desirability of our plans. Our hopes for the future are built on nothing less than the love of Jesus and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. In moving boldly out into the community with the Good News of God's love we know that no matter what our individual weaknesses, we are made strong by the power of God. Let us be sure that we reject neither the prophetic Word of God found in the Scriptures nor the prophet that each of us has within us. To be a follower of Christ Jesus means not only personal piety, not only the pursuit of God's justice, but also going in the spirit of God's love to teach all with whom we come in contact how Jesus lived and died and rose again and how he taught us to live. It will not be appealing to everyone. It will seem like foolishness to many, this whole idea of God who was man, of God who loved the world enough to die. Put the needs of others ahead of our own? Worry about those scruffy bums who sleep in the bushes? Listen to some ordinary person, one of our neighbors who plays music too loud or drives an ugly old car? What sort of nonsense is that? The message of Christ, the message we carry, is not about being popular in the neighborhood. It's about leading our neighbors towards the love of God, even if they don't want to follow. "But it's Good News!" we'll shout and some will only sneer. But some, a few anyway, will be blessed and we, in blessing them, will have truly become the Body of Christ. Thanks be to God!