

You Can't Go Home Again
Rev. Dennis H. Kelly

In September of 1977 I moved into an apartment in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, not too far from the University of Chicago. I was about to embark on a new journey in my life as a seminary student at the Lutheran School of Theology. I wasn't sure where this journey would lead me, but I knew that this would be a time to consider whether it was my calling in life to become an ordained minister in the Lutheran Church.

That moment was the result of a 22-year journey that began at my baptism as an infant at Jehovah Lutheran Church in Chicago. My journey continued on as my faith was nurtured by my parents, my pastors, Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders. I continued to grow in my faith and spiritual development through the campus ministry church at Augustana College.

I remember that day when I moved out of the family home in Lake Villa and into my apartment in Chicago. There was a mixture of anticipation and concern as I moved from the suburbs into the heart of the city. I remember thinking that this was the last time I would ever live at home, for a new phase of my life had begun.

There is an old saying by Thomas Wolfe that says, "You can't go home again." And there is a certain truth to that statement. For many people, when they have left home for a long time, it is often difficult to go back. And for some, when they do go back, after years of living somewhere else, there is the feeling that home is not the same as you remember it. Or perhaps it is you who are not the same.

Every once in a while I will drive by my old home which my parents sold at least 15 years ago. The neighborhood doesn't look the same. The fields where my friends and I played baseball and football not have houses on them. The schools I attended have either been torn down or expanded beyond recognition. And even my home congregation has changed to the point where I hardly know anyone and it longer feels like the church in which I grew up.

In our Gospel lesson, we are told the story of Jesus who is back in his home town of Nazareth for the first time since beginning his public ministry. This passage is a continuation of last Sunday's reading of Jesus in the synagogue. His former friends and neighbors had heard about the amazing things that Jesus had accomplished. They were aware of the things he had done and the words that he had spoken. No doubt there was a sense of pride felt by these people when they imagined that they had something to do with what Jesus had chosen to do with his life. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" We know him...he is one of us!

All of the trips down memory lane, however, came to an abrupt end when Jesus began to speak in the synagogue. It soon became clear that Jesus was not there to renew old

friendships. Rather, he was there to announce a startling new message. He came to them, not as their friend, but rather as a prophet, sent by God. The words he spoke to them made them angry. Jesus was no longer the person they knew. He was no longer one of them.

They weren't ready for his message directed towards them and when they couldn't listen to his words any longer they tried to kill him. They carried him to the edge of a hill like a mob intent on a lynching. What stopped them from following through, we aren't told. All we are told is that Jesus walked away without another word, never choosing to comment on this experience. Perhaps the townspeople no longer knew him – but the important thing is God knew him. God the Father had already declared him to be his Beloved Son.

In the reading from Jeremiah we read these words: "Before you were born I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you." And in the Psalm we spoke these words: "I have been sustained by you ever since I was born, from my mother's womb you have been my strength. Both of these passages speak the God who knows us, sustains us, and loves us even before we come into existence.

As a result of this encounter with his hometown folks, Jesus experiences something that all almost all of the biblical prophets faced. People may listen to the words of the prophet or preacher but only as long as the words spoken are not judgments upon them. Jesus acknowledged this fact earlier when he said to them, "Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town."

The question is, however, can we really blame the people of Nazareth for their reaction? They watched him grow up. They knew that he was the son of a common laborer. They knew his level of education. They knew that he was taught in the same schools and by the same teachers as their own children. So what right does this Jesus have in coming into their synagogue and offering words of judgment upon them? Does he think that he is better than we are?

Their anger was not simply the result of their feeling that Jesus no longer seemed to be one of their own. They were angry because Jesus didn't meet their expectations. They wanted Jesus to perform some miracle. They wanted Jesus to give them a sign. They wanted to see the things that other people in other towns had seen. Yet Jesus gives them none of these signs or miracles. Instead, Jesus just gives them words, words that challenge them to their very core and warned them to not make assumptions about their relationship with God.

What Jesus is saying to them was truly radical. The stories he tells from the Old Testament relate those times that God chose, not a Jew, but a Gentile to receive a blessing, or to be lifted up as an example. Their message is that sometimes God had to go outside of Israel because Israel was not ready to hear God's words, or to be changed, or healed, by them.

The message that Jesus is trying to convey to his fellow citizens of Nazareth, and his fellow Jews, is that their relationship to God is being threatened by their own sinfulness. No one is entitled to God's blessing. There are no special privileges granted for being part of one faith community versus another.

God is choosing to bring salvation to all people, not just to the Jews. They always assumed that salvation was theirs as a result of their birthright, tracing their ancestry to Abraham and Sarah. But Jesus says true salvation come from responding to the promises and challenges of God through faith, independent of your lineage or ancestry. This message demanded that they change their thinking and their attitudes about God.

No prophet, in any age or time, ever has it easy. The story of Jeremiah in our first reading is a perfect example of that. Jeremiah is called to prophetic ministry when he is just a boy, perhaps no older than 12 years old. It is not the kind of responsibility that a young boy would want. Nor does he feel prepared to do it, appealing to the Lord on the basis of his youthfulness. Jeremiah clearly does not see this call as a positive thing in his life.

But God does not let Jeremiah go. He does not accept his youthfulness as an excuse. He assures Jeremiah that he will give him the right words to say. The Lord comforts Jeremiah by saying that God will be with him every step along the way. "Don't be afraid," says the Lord, "...for I am with you."

However, the prophetic life was not an easy one for Jeremiah. Nor was it easy for the prophets Elisha, Elijah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Amos, or any of the others from the Old Testament. It wasn't easy for Jesus either. The prophetic message is usually not well received by those to whom the word of the Lord has been sent.

The people of Nazareth in the synagogue in Nazareth are examples as people who reject the very word that is sent to them. They learn that God does not always send his word to make things easy. God sends the word to make things right. And what God thinks is right and what we humans think is right, are often two different things.

Martin Luther once said, "The word does everything!" It can build up and it can destroy." The words echo the words spoken to Jeremiah, when the Lord says, "I appoint you over the nations and over the kingdoms to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." His mission begins with the change and destruction. But the words end with restoration and hope.

The prophetic ministry of Jesus continues on even to this day and in this world we live in. There are still things that are not the way God desires them to be. We still try to settle our differences with violence and bloodshed instead of finding the path to peace. We still see people around us who are homeless and hungry, wondering where their next meal would come from. We still see the devastating impact of systemic racism in our nation and throughout the world. We see the accumulated wealth of the few ultra-rich totaling more than the rest of the world combined.

As children of God, we are expected to help change these things through our own prophetic words and deeds. There are things that need to be built up. We are called to be the laborers who work in the name of Jesus Christ to do this reconciling and restorative work.

Living the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ will not be easy. It will constantly bring us in direct conflict with our community, with our neighbors, and sometimes even our friends. Perhaps it may bring us into conflict with our own church community.

Most of us would prefer not to hear prophetic words directed at us. Rather we would prefer that these words be directed towards others. The Gospel story makes it clear that sometimes that message will be directed towards us. And sometimes it is us ourselves who the Lord asks to change.

Most of us, when asked, would prefer not to speak God's prophetic words to others. Like Jeremiah, we would prefer to offer excuses, "I am too young, I am too old, I am too busy, or I wouldn't know what to say." But the Old Testament story makes it clear that sometimes we will be asked to respond even when we don't want to say, "Yes." The Gospel story makes it clear that sometimes we will be asked to change others.

In both cases, as hearers and as speakers, we have assurances from God. Words of prophecy are sometimes harsh. But we need not be afraid. For the Lord promises to us that he will not abandon us. Even though we sometimes give up on God, God never gives up on us.

Thanks be to God!