

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

After Jesus had been baptized, you recall, He went immediately out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. When that sortie had concluded, Jesus began His preaching ministry. He called His disciples unto Himself. If you're interested in a timeline, I think this is where the wedding happened at Cana in Galilee, and Jesus did His first miracle. And then, according to Matthew, Jesus "*went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people*" (Matt. 4:23). And Jesus' fame spread throughout the region.

What Luke hinted at when he recorded Jesus' scolding, "*What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well,*" Matthew was more explicit in recording: He "*entered Capernaum*" (Matt. 8:5), and there did more miracles. And Matthew explicitly attributed these miracles as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "*He took our illnesses and bore our diseases*" (Matt. 8:17 quoting Isaiah 53:4).

Some time thereafter, Jesus came back to His hometown, to Nazareth. And when the Sabbath rolled around Jesus went to the synagogue. It was His custom to go to the synagogue—His habit, if you will.

Certainly, we have the commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy," and we know Luther's explanation: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." But law breaking is so easy to do. How much easier it is to sleep in on a Sunday rather than pray. What Jesus said to His disciples in the garden applies to us: "*Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Matt. 26:41). Therefore, Jesus here sets an example for us. Establish a habit of churchgoing, and commandment-keeping becomes a part of your custom.

And this habit makes a difference in the attitude on any number of issues, but as the life issue is on our minds a lot in January, consider: according to Pew Research, of those persons who attend services "seldom/never," only 24% think that abortion should be "illegal in all/most cases"—only 24% favor life; of those persons who attend "once or twice a month/a few times a year," 37% think that abortion should be "illegal in all/most cases"; but of those who attend services "at least once a week," 63% think that abortion should be "illegal in all/most cases"—63% favor life (Pew Research, Religious Landscape Survey, 2014). Truly, when we regularly hear God's word read and proclaimed, our minds are more attuned to His ways, and not our own.

Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath as was His custom and got up to read the Scriptures. The “synagogue must have been filled to capacity,” one commentator says, for the hometown boy was now famous and He was there with His “band of disciples” (Lenski, Commentary on the New Testament, Luke, p. 245). That’s what hometowns do for one of their own made good. But they didn’t expect what Jesus was about to say. They were about to think that Jesus had gotten a bit too uppity for His own britches.

Jesus took the scroll, opened it, and found the place where Isaiah had written: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* And then Jesus applied it to Himself. *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Without a doubt, Jesus had spoken gracious words, words to marvel at, yet the people in the Nazareth synagogue were offended by them. “Don’t forget, Jesus, we know you. We knew your father.” *“Is not this Joseph’s son?”* “Of course, He is,” they thought they knew so well. But they didn’t know Jesus as well as they thought. Mary and Joseph had kept that little secret to themselves.

“Who does Jesus think He is?” Jesus had just told them: He is the Christ, the One anointed by God, filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14) to bring about our rescue from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus is the One sent by God with a purpose and an objective: to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), to lay down His life unto death for us sinners, that we might be reconciled to God by His death and saved by His life (Rom. 5:8-10).

Jesus was sent to set free the captives and set at liberty the oppressed. It’s sin and the law that is being talked about here, too. St. Paul says, *“Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed”* (Gal. 3:23). Again, *“the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe”* (Gal. 3:22).

But *“in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith,”* and you’re *“in Christ Jesus”* when you are baptized into Him (Gal. 3:27). And *“in Christ Jesus”* you have been set free *“from the law of sin and death”* (Rom. 8:2). For by baptism, dying and rising with Christ, you have been *“released from the law, having died to that which held [you] captive, so that [you may] serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code”* (Rom. 7:6).

That’s who Jesus was claiming to be—the promised Messiah who would preach good news, who would atone for sins, who would heal and bind up, who

would reestablish the Lord's favor, not just for Jews but for Gentiles, too—and that's just what His hometown folks couldn't accept. "*Physician, heal yourself.*" "Do some of those miracles we heard about, if you can. We don't believe you are anything special." You can just hear the mockery like that heaped upon Jesus from the cross in these words of unbelief. "*Save yourself, and come down from the cross*" (Mark 15:30)! Then "*we will believe in him*" (Matt. 27:42). What was true of tiny Nazareth — His own did not receive Him (John 1:11) — would be on full display at Jesus' trial before Pilate: "*Release ... Barabbas. ... Away with [Jesus], crucify him! ... We have no king but Caesar*" (Luke 23:18; John 19:15).

Moreover, Jesus shines the spotlight on their unbelief: "*Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown,*" pointing them to the examples of Israel's unbelief, of Elijah sent to the Gentile widow in the time of famine, who would later lament: "*the people of Israel have ... killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away*" (1 Ki. 19:10) and of Elisha who cured the Gentile leper.

Of course, the people were enraged by this and sought to throw Jesus off a cliff and kill Him. But had they been successful, their unbelief would have been confirmed, for as Jesus would later affirm, "*it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem*" (Luke 13:33). "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets ...*" (Luke 13:34). Jesus would indeed be killed in Jerusalem, a prophet, to be sure, but more than a prophet, as the Lamb of God bearing the sins of the world. But that wasn't this day. Thus Jesus did one of the few miracles He performed in Nazareth: He passed through the crowd and departed His hometown, never again to return.

So, here's the question for us: has America become a Nazareth today, rejecting her "hometown boy"? I pray not, though the task ahead of the church is difficult.

Certainly religious liberty was a major factor in our nation's founding by a mostly Christian people. They had a fidelity to Christ, even if there were theological differences among the various Christian sects that made the difficult journey to America. But that fidelity has been abandoned — "*the love [we] had at first*" (Rev. 2:4) has been largely abandoned, rejected. I recall Dr. Jay Budziszewski at a Symposium a few years back talk about how difficult the church's task of evangelism now is, for America is not a country that does not know of Jesus. It's a country that thinks it knows all about Jesus and has rejected Him.

Luther once wrote to the Councilmen of All Cities of the German Nation: "God's word and grace is a passing rain shower which does not return where it

once was” (Luther’s Works, 45:352). Has the rain stopped falling in America, never to return? Shall we abandon the task given us? I think not, and Luther hadn’t given up in 1524 on the Germans, either. Rather, he was exhorting the councilmen to establish and maintain Christian schools. In this National Lutheran Schools Week, it’s a good reminder of what we have in our schools as a way to let the rain of the Gospel continue to fall. May God’s word in our schools like *“the rain and the snow ... from heaven”* continue to *“water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout”* with faith (Is. 55:10).

And for us in the church, God grant that we may continue to *“preach the word”* faithfully (2 Tim. 4:2), enduring this season patiently, *“bearing up for [Jesus’] name’s sake”* (Rev. 2:3), and never grow weary. Let us as hearers “not despise preaching and [God’s] word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” Let us repent and recover the zeal we once had, ever remembering the promise: *“To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God”* (Rev. 2:7). God grant it for the sake of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.