

**Growing Up With Jesus: Jesus and His Home Congregation**  
**A Sermon delivered by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022**

*“Ask the complicated questions, do not fear to be found out, for our God makes strong our weakness, forging faith in fires of doubt.”*

These words from *Voices Together* #440 are striking, even if a bit unsettling. I don't know what stood out to you in that sentence, but for me I was drawn to the words “do not fear to be found out.” I think that many of us probably have had the experience at some point in our faith journeys, of having a question or questions about faith that we worry might be a bit too controversial, or a bit beyond the bounds of what is thought to be an ‘acceptable’ questioning of what we have been taught about God, about the world, or about faith. Especially in our growing up years, there may be a kind of fear that comes with the questioning itself: “If I question this, will I be heard or ostracized? Will I make someone too uncomfortable? Will I make someone angry or disappointed?”

I think this fear of “being found out” is especially acute when it takes place within one's “home” community or home congregation. Communities of all sorts, including the church, often have a natural desire to have their own, especially their young people, stay loyal, “stick with the fold,” and “make their community proud.” On the surface, there is nothing wrong this; it is quite a good thing for a congregation or a community that loves and cares for younger folks in their midst to desire that that they will serve God through contributing to the life of the community as they grow up. But what happens when those nurtured within a community, be they young or old, begin to proclaim the good news of God in a way that challenges the way the community operates? What happens when they begin to ask complicated questions of their home community, and even uncover stale assumptions and unhealthy habits within the community? I suspect that every church faces these types of situations periodically. In many ways it is part of

the story of God's people that there will inevitably be times when the community of God begins to lose sight of God's coming kingdom, when the community attempts to withhold the good news it has been given. And when these times come, God will often call people within the church to speak a word that is hard to hear; a prophetic word, birthed from the Spirit's unrest with the status quo. Recognizing this, it would be a helpful discipline for the church to work all the time at nurturing congregations that are safe and welcoming spaces for all, especially our young people, to ask complicated questions about the life of the community of faith.

This morning, I invite you to enter imaginatively into the life of one small community, one small congregation from a long time ago...a community where a certain young man had been raised, learned about God, and one day left his community only to return with good news that was, nonetheless, accompanied by a difficult word for his hometown. The community I speak of was a village called Nazareth and the young man I am referring to is Jesus. In this imaginative exercise, I want to introduce you to an adult member of that community, a person who knew Jesus and was also part of his home congregation. I have written a little monologue in the character of this imagined person, who also happened to be a mentor of Jesus. Try to picture this person as a respected elder that Jesus spent many Sabbaths in the synagogue with, learning about scripture and asking many complicated questions about faith. Through his words, let's see what we might discover about Jesus' prophetic mission as well as what we might have to learn about being a community that embraces complicated questions brought to them by the prophetic Spirit of God.

-----

*A Monologue Spoken in the Voice of Jesus' Mentor*

I was awestruck as I watched him walk up the aisle that day, take the scroll in his hands, and turn to read from the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus and I had been meeting at synagogue for years, ever since he was a young man. While some of the others paid him little attention or found his questions a bit “out there,” I was always amazed at his inquisitiveness and the wonder with which he approached worship of the Lord. Every time we would read through the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, Jesus always had questions for me—some of them I had never even thought to ask before and did not have ready answers to. Although I was a mentor to him, I sometimes felt he was mentoring me. He was wise beyond his years. I wasn’t entirely surprised by this. While he was still a teenager, Mary and Joseph had told me stories about some of the amazing circumstances surrounding his birth and then his later escapades at the Jerusalem temple during Passover when he was 12 years old. There were rumors among a few of the townsfolk that he might be gifted to do great things for our people, but these rumors were just that, rumors. Joseph once quietly whispered to me that an angel had told me that Jesus would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). I wasn’t so sure about that. In every other respect he seemed like any other Jewish boy his age.

I watched him grow into a fine young man, and he started taking on greater responsibility both at home and at the synagogue. The community expected of him what they expected of every young Jewish boy: learn Torah, contribute to the well-being of home and village life. In Nazareth, everyone hoped that Jesus would do right by his parents, learn Torah, observe our way of life, and have a family. I could sense already in his later teen years and especially in his early 20s that there was an unrest in him, though. He was not finding himself quite at home in Nazareth. He longed for a greater purpose and every time he opened the scriptures he grew increasingly unsettled with his present circumstances. His ideas of a greater mission often put

him at odds with those in our village. Some suggested that he put away any childish ideas of life beyond Nazareth and settle down.

Then, one day, when he was about 30 years old, he invited me to accompany him to Galilee as he made a trek to the Jordan river. He had heard that John the baptizer was there offering people a ritual of purification and exhorting them to repent of their sins and walk in newness of life. Jesus said that he wanted to go and respond to the call of the Baptist. We arrived at the Jordan on a cloudy morning. I watched in amazement as Jesus walked into the water and then was plunged under by John. The clouds broke and the sun suddenly shone brilliantly on him and, looking into his eyes, I could sense at that moment that something had changed in Jesus.

After that, he sent me on my way home to Nazareth...he told me had had to spend some time alone...to pray and try to figure out what God had in store for him. I didn't see him for over a month. It was hard on Mary and Joseph. Everyone in town began talking, spreading rumors about him, that he had either abandoned Torah and gone the way of the Gentiles or that he had secretly left for another village to live a life there, abandoning his family ties and bringing shame to his family. "He always was a little out there," some said.... "always asking complicated questions."<sup>1</sup> I tried to tell Mary and Joseph to not listen to those voices, to reassure them that God had something greater in store. I prayed that God did.

And then, out of the blue, we started hearing that Jesus had shown up in synagogues in Galilee, teaching fellow Jews and proclaiming, just like John the baptizer, that the kingdom of God was at hand. Not only that, we heard that he had also started performing miraculous deeds in the fishing village of Capernaum. People called him a prophet, saying he was like a new

---

<sup>1</sup> An interpretive note here: Jews were quite well versed, and remain so to this day, with asking "complicated questions." At no point do I intend otherwise in this monologue. What I do intend, however, is to suggest that some within Jesus' hometown, did not appreciate the challenge and the prophetic judgment that Jesus, a fellow Jew, brought against his hometown. I think this is Luke's meaning in Luke 4 as well.

Elijah. Suddenly the talk about Jesus in Nazareth changed. Before the rumors had written him off as a potential source of shame but now, *now* he was the village hero! Word came to us that he was coming home. There was a mood of great anticipation in town. When he arrived, everyone expected Jesus to bring with him all of the prophetic power that we had heard about. After all, if any town was to be honored with the miracles and deeds of a great prophet of God, surely it would be his hometown!

When I heard that he was spotted entering the synagogue, I rushed there and stood in the back because there was barely any more room. When Jesus read those powerful words from Isaiah, proclaiming himself the Lord's anointed one, the one who brings good news of freedom from oppression, release from captivity under Rome, and the year of the Lord's favor, there was a buzz in the synagogue! The reactions all around me were ecstatic. People started saying, "No way. This is Joseph's boy? That can't be. He talks as though he is the expected prophet, Elijah!" I was amazed too. When I made eye contact with Jesus, I expected to see a look of pride and joy on his face, being that he was so positively regarded by all. As his mentor, it would have given me such joy to see Jesus finally feel at home and welcomed in his hometown. But instead of joy....Jesus had that look in his eyes, the same look that he always had every time he asked me one of his complicated questions. And then something happened that changed everything. Jesus interrupted the buzz:

Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.' ..."Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.

When Jesus stopped talking, it was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop. And then, the silence was broken by an angry murmur. No longer the excited buzz, but rage filled the synagogue. I heard shouts of: “He’s comparing us to the Baal worshippers in King Ahab’s Israel!” “How dare he!” “If he was truly Elijah he would not speak this way!” “What ever happened to respecting your hometown?” Suddenly, it was like a wave of people ushered Jesus out of the synagogue to the top of our village hill. They were ready to be done with him...the son of Joseph who brought shame to his hometown instead of fame. I froze. I didn’t know what to do. I remember thinking to myself: “their proving his point! He felt unwelcomed by many before and his complicated questions were rarely welcomed, and now they want to be rid of him for good.” I don’t know how he managed to walk through them, but he walked out of the angry mob, and turned a corner. I feared that I might not see him again, so I ran after him.

When I caught up with him, we shared a brief moment before he left. He thanked me for always listening to him and told me that God was calling me to preach the good news of the coming kingdom too, but that it would mean repentance and being willing to ask uncomfortable questions about life in Nazareth. I implored him to stay, but he said to me: “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also” (Luke 4:43). “Nazareth is a small corner of land and God’s kingdom is growing.” I apologized to him for the actions of his hometown. He put a hand on my shoulder and said: “God’s kingdom is a kingdom of welcome and love. If many wouldn’t welcome me here today, then who else would also be unwelcome? Elijah and Elisha showed us just how welcoming God is. What will it take for Nazareth to learn from them?” I didn’t know what to say, so I just watched as he shook the dust off his feet, and left town. I think back to that image often...that image of him shaking the dust off his feet and I think to myself, it could have been different. We could have welcomed the prophetic Spirit

speaking within Jesus all along, not just as part of putting up with his youthful curiosity, but as part of our own obedience to the Spirit of God too. Maybe I can still help this little village of Nazareth listen to the Spirit.

### ***END MONOLOGUE***

I hope that this monologue of an imagined mentor of Jesus' has helped you enter more fully the story of Jesus' visit to his hometown. I'm curious, who did you identify with in this story? Was it Jesus, whose questions were not welcomed? Was it the mob? Was it Jesus' mentor? I hope that we can talk about it more during second hour. In the hours and days to come, as we reflect on Jesus' words in the synagogue from that fateful day, let us be inspired to "grow up with Jesus" by being a community that welcomes God's prophetic spirit speaking through *all*, no matter how uncomfortable it might make us. And may we be a community that looks beyond itself, to the far horizons of God's kingdom of love.