

Sunday 3

We are at the beginning of what is called ordinary time in the church's liturgical year, having finished the Christmas season. Therefore we could expect that the Scripture readings would "begin at the beginning." Not of course at the Lord's birth, for we covered that material in the Christmas season, but at the beginning of Jesus' public life, of his adult life as a preacher and healer. In fact they do. For instance, last Sunday, the second Sunday of ordinary time, we read from ch. 2 of John's gospel where Jesus performs a miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, a miracle described as the first of his miracles. And the previous Sunday, the first Sunday in ordinary time, we read about his baptism, which is clearly at the beginning of his public life. And today we watch him as he returns for the first time to his home town of Nazareth. So, if we put these gospel readings for these first three Sundays of the church's ordinary time together, we have the following: the young man emerging out of the waters of the Jordan and now identified as the Father's beloved son; the young man producing wine for an embarrassed couple, and the young man returning to the synagogue of his hometown and getting up to read.

All the Gospels except John record today's gospel scene of Jesus' return to his home town and its synagogue. But Luke's account, which is our Gospel today, differs from Mark's and Matthew's accounts in three ways. First, it puts this episode at the beginning of Jesus' career, while they have it more in the middle of it. Secondly, it gives the text from which Jesus reads: Isaiah 61. They do not. Third, it adds these two sentences at the end of the scene: "Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, 'Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.'"

At first the leaders at Nazareth are pleased to hear this message. But then they begin to wonder how he, the son of Joseph, the carpenter, can have such wisdom and healing power. And then they begin to take offense at his behavior. They don't believe in him, and so he cannot perform miracles there. But then in Luke's account Jesus goes on to say that he will follow the example of Elisha and Elisha who in their day healed not Jews but strangers, foreigners. That is too much for them. They rise up and try to kill him by throwing off the cliff on which the city is built.

Is there a lesson for us here? Is there a similarity between the synagogue leaders in Nazareth and ourselves when it comes to the stranger? Does our Jesus wear an American flag and only an American flag? Or does he wear the flags of all the countries of the world. Perhaps at times we nationalize the Lord instead of seeing him as the Lord of all nations. When we do that, we are in the wrong place. Then we are not with the Lord who heals strangers but with the angry leaders of his hometown who do not believe in him and attempt to kill him.