

Looking For Christ In All The Wrong Places

Isaiah 9:1-6; John 4:43-52

We've been now for some weeks in a section of John's gospel that is all about unlikeliness. Jesus has just spent two days winning over hearts and minds in a Samaritan village. And the point man, the first evangelist into this foreign, semi-pagan town was not any of Jesus' apostles, not the men who knew and loved Jesus best, but a Samaritan woman, who had only just believed in Jesus. And this, after Christ had confronted her about her checkered past and her mistaken doctrine! This shady, saucy woman had gone back to her village and told all of them that she had seen and heard the Messiah.

And the point here is irony! Jesus had worked his wonders in Jerusalem, only to anger the authorities and perplex Nicodemus! And then he had worked a revival up and down the Jordan River valley, only to be run out of the Judean heartland by believers, the Pharisees, who should have welcomed him with open arms. But Jesus' gospel that everyone, even rabbis, needed to wash in the Jordan and confess their sins and open their hearts to a new birth in the Spirit, that was too much for people who were already kosher and tidy. The Pharisees imagined they had mastered Moses themselves, so they weren't open to learning anything new, or trusting anyone new to be their master.

The Pharisees were their own masters! And so this morning John's gospel shows us Jesus fleeing Jerusalem and Judea and heading north, through the Samaritan hills on his way out to the border country, the far provinces of old Israel, near the Sea of Galilee, past the headwaters of the Jordan. And why was Jesus leaving his Father's house, and the sanctuary that his Father had sent him to redeem and restore? John tells us that "*...Jesus himself had testified that a prophet is without honor in his own country.*"

Ironically, in this gospel, the further Jesus gets from Jerusalem the better he does. So it is the Samaritans, the heretic half-breeds, who begged Jesus to stay with them just a little bit longer. It is the Galileans, John tells us, who "*welcomed him because they'd seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, because they themselves had gone to the feast.*" So Samaria and Galilee had welcomed Jesus more openly than had "*his home country... Jerusalem*", John tells us.

And this is not some stroke out of the blue, unrelated to any sort of biblical prophecy. Like Jesus in this gospel, Isaiah, 700 years before, had begun his ministry in the Jerusalem sanctuary. "*...I saw the Lord, seated on a throne, high and lifted up and the train of his robe filled the temple*", Isaiah wrote. And what did God say to Isaiah, in chapter six, in this majestic temple vision? God said, in so many words: "Nobody's going to listen to you here!" But where will light shine, in the book of Isaiah? Where will joy take hold and the rod of the oppressor be broken? Where will "*a son be given...and his name... be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*" ?

Isaiah tells us where in chapter nine of his prophecy. It will be in the far provinces, way up north, Isaiah writes “*the land of Zebulun and ...Naphtali...in the last days...by way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations*” is the place where light and hope will dawn, where a Son will be given and Savior will arise. And the point here in John’s gospel is ironic, that the way for people to get back to the garden is not to head for Jerusalem, but to look for a Savior in the unlikely places, in the far provinces, “*Galilee of the Gentiles*”, right on the border, near where the unbelievers live.

Jesus’ first sign had been given in Cana of Galilee “*where,*” John tells us, “*he made water into wine*”. So what we will read this morning is the second instance of Jesus performing a sign in “*Cana in Galilee*”. Jesus comes to Cana first stop home from Judea. The sign we read is, of course, not Jesus’ second sign strictly speaking, he had performed numerous “*signs*” in Jerusalem before Nicodemus visited him by night. But this is the second sign introduced in detail, in John’s gospel, the second of seven signs John will use to make the case that “*...Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*” It was an unlikely, obscure place to host these first two official signs in John’s gospel. It was a little hill town, not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament and the suffix “*in Galilee*” seems to indicate that even John’s readers, his contemporaries, would need help locating the place.

So Jesus, after the tumult of his ministry in Jerusalem and his flight through Samaritan hills, found someplace quiet to land in Galilee. But it wouldn’t remain quiet for long, because news reached the lakeside town of Capernaum that Jesus was back in Galilee, and that provoked a “*royal official*” in a desperate situation to travel twenty miles inland and upland to gain Jesus’ attention for his son who was “*at the point of death*”, John tells us. The boy’s father was likely a nobleman in Herod’s service, which makes him another unlikely character, a rich, worldly man who served one of the sons of Herod the Great, the old wicked king who had tried to murder Jesus in the cradle.

So this nobleman left his own son, desperately ill, and found Jesus teaching to a hill country crowd in Cana and he interrupted Christ to beg him to leave at once and come save his boy while there was still time. Now Jesus’ response to the desperate nobleman sounds shockingly heartless to modern ears. Jesus said to him “*Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe!*”

Now the fact that Jesus said this to everyone there and not just to the desperate father softens it just a little. And the point seems to be that signs and wonders, relief from heartbreak and suffering, are only good if and when they lead us to trust and love and follow the Savior who gave them.

In any case, right there and then, the father only pressed his case harder. “*Lord, come down before my child dies!*” And again, Jesus’ answer seems strangely double-edged. Christ is bound

and determined not to be at the nobleman's beck and call. Jesus isn't going anywhere. But on the other hand, there is compassion. He looks the desperate father in the eye and says, "*Go, your way. Your son will live.*" This had to have been a challenge to the nobleman's faith, as most ancient supernaturalist practitioners required closeness and drama to work their magic.

Some 800 years before, another palace nobleman, Naaman the Syrian, had been outraged and angry when Elisha the Prophet had treated him the same way in 1st Kings 5. But here in John's gospel, this nobleman simply "*believed the word Jesus spoke to him and went on his way*". And as he descended the Galilean hills back toward the lake, the nobleman was met by his servants, rushing out to tell him that his son had taken a turn for the better. The man asked when the boy's recovery had begun and was told by his slaves that it had been "*yesterday at the seventh hour*", @ 1pm our time.

And the point, the wonder of this sign was that it was more a matter of simple, sovereign power than any sort of special conjuring on Jesus' part that saved this man's boy. The desperation of the journeys, forth and back, the desperation of the man's simple plea, combined with the odd lack of warmth or personal involvement on Jesus' part all highlighted how immense was Jesus' power and how simple his compassion. Jesus had absolutely no need to be center stage at this boy's deliverance.

And the effect on the lives of father and son was not diminished in any way by the fact that Jesus never laid eyes on the boy. The father "*believed, and all his household.*", the text tells us. So now twice Jesus has made believers out of outsiders, first, a Samaritan woman, far from anything old Israel would consider kosher or tidy, and, now, a palace nobleman, a man who served Herod, a king so corrupt that he gave the head of a prophet to his stepdaughter as payment for a belly dance.

John closes the story by telling us that "*This was now the second sign, a sign Jesus did after he had come from Judea to Galilee.*" The point being that John had dozens of signs to choose the seven he used to make his case for Christ. The fact that the first two he chose happened in Cana, an unlikely Galilean hill town was, I think, meant to teach that God's focus and power had begun to move away from Old Israel's temple and out into the countryside where unlikely people in all kinds of need and trouble longed to be remembered and touched and helped by God. It was a daunting prospect for men like Nicodemus who would need to start life all over in the Spirit, but good news for people who were untidy and un-kosher enough to want and welcome a Savior and a change.