



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**www.SaintThomasChurch.org**

**Sunday, January 27, 2019**  
*The Third Sunday After the Epiphany*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*  
*on*  
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 and Luke 4:14-21

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### **The Wild Goose**

Think of your childhood best friend. Or maybe not your best friend, but someone you knew when you were younger. Someone you haven't seen in years. Maybe a neighborhood kid that you played kickball with in the street or baseball with in an empty lot in the summertime. Maybe a classmate you worked on a science project with. Someone you asked out to a dance. A face in a yearbook that you haven't thought about in forever. And then, one night, flipping through the channels, that face shows up on TV.

Jesus didn't grow up in a vacuum. He had neighbors and childhood friends, aunts and uncles and cousins. They saw him lose his baby teeth. They knew him with zits and greasy hair and all the awkwardness of being a teenager. They watched Joseph teach him how to build a table or fix a roof. They witnessed Mary tending to his scraped knee or cut forehead injured in a game with the other local children.

Imagine that was you. A kid growing up next door to Joseph and Mary's place. Rachel or Benjamin of Nazareth. You knew him when...

And now, in today's Gospel story, Jesus is back in town after some time away - off who-knows-where. And the things he's saying are disturbing. They are wrong and offensive. He's claiming the mantle of the messiah, claiming to be the one in whom prophecy will be fulfilled. This hometown kid. Your neighbor. Who does he think he is?

There's a thing that happens all across America that probably happened in Judea too. Young people grow up in small towns like Wadsworth, Ohio or Kerhonkson, New York and they head off to places like Chicago or Manhattan.

There was an article recently about this phenomenon in the European Union. Young people from small farming towns in Germany and France returning from the big city, from Berlin or Paris or London, to the place where they grew up for the holidays. The article explored the difficult conversations around the dinner table about politics and social issues between the rural parents and their now-urban children. The shock of local kids coming home again.

Those words of the prophet Isaiah... "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." These words, in many first

century interpretations, would have pointed to the work of the longed for Messiah. When they thought about the Messiah, those in Jesus's day imagined him as a warrior king - like King David - who would overthrow the occupying Roman Empire. An agent of God's mighty work.

And Jesus stands up there - in front of people who knew him so well - and he says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

"But isn't this Joseph and Mary's kid?" His neighbors and childhood friends ask, "Did he just equate himself with the Messiah. Or, even, with GOD?"

Who does he think he is?

Their reaction is so different from the reactions in Nehemiah to the reading of the law. There are tears and worship among the crowds as Ezra reads. But a few verses along in Luke's Gospel, the crowd in Nazareth will try and kill Jesus for what he proclaimed in the synagogue.

There's a shock there. A double-take. An offense. Something familiar made suddenly strange.

We lose so much in our reading of the Scriptures today in how well we know them - in our over-familiarity with Jesus and the Gospel story. We lose the edge. The hard and sharp edge.

We forget what it would have sounded like to a Benjamin or a Rachel of Nazareth to hear "This Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" from the neighbor they thought they knew.

It is helpful to sit with how that day might have felt to them.

My spiritual life has been shaped by the spiritual tradition of the Jesuits and their founder Saint Ignatius of Loyola. And one of the approaches of that tradition is to pray like this. To enter into the Scriptures imaginatively. To put yourself there in the midst of the story. To feel how it would have felt to actually be there.

Another of the tenets of the Ignatian tradition is that God shows up in all things, in daily life. We can sometimes, I can certainly sometimes, convince myself that God only shows up in certain ways. In church or in what I deem holy things or good people. I feel, at these times, like I understand how God works and who God favors.

Humanity has long sought to make God conveniently small enough to fit in our own back pocket; to be pulled out and deployed as we deem useful - like a Divine Debit Card or Sanctified Swiss Army Knife. A spiritual smartphone programmed with apps we've carefully chosen to be most helpful to US. We can come to think God is always taking our side, rubber-stamping our goodness and rightness and our opinions and way of life. We, like Jesus' neighbors, think we know how God works and who God favors and it is a source of great comfort and confidence for us. And then Jesus shows up.

We "think faith is a big electric blanket," wrote Flannery O'Connor, "when of course it is the cross."

We need the kind of shock of unfamiliarity that Benjamin and Rachel of Nazareth felt in that synagogue. Except instead of trying to kill off the Jesus who troubles or shocks us, as they did, we need to allow him into our hearts and our imaginations. To surprise us with his grace and mercy, and to shake us out of our complacency. We need the strangeness of Jesus.

A 2014 Yale University study found that most of us would rather be alone than meet a stranger. And yet the same study found such interactions as linked with human happiness.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus reads in the synagogue. The Holy Spirit. Not always the calmest and most familiar person of the Blessed Trinity. The Holy Spirit: Often depicted as fire, as rushing wind, through the speaking in odd tongues or the working of strange supernatural signs. The Celtic Christians depicted the Spirit of the Lord as a wild goose. I used to have to regularly traverse a flock of these geese to get into the hospital I worked at in Chicago. And they would chase me, trying to bite my ankles. Sticking out their tongues and hissing at me. They’re irritable and mean. They’re loud. Not comforting creatures, geese. Odd. Unpredictable.

Martin Luther, apparently, didn’t much like the Letter of James. It didn’t square with his understanding of God. He wanted to cut it out of the Bible. What images of or stories about God scare or unsettle you? What parts of Jesus or the Gospel don’t you like? Meditate on those. Hold them close. Let them unsettle you. Because a God who is entirely familiar or comprehensible or comforting is not God.

St. Augustine wrote, “If you think you have understood God, you may be sure it was not God you understood.”

God isn’t all strangeness and challenge, of course. The prophecy that Jesus proclaims in today’s text is the prophecy of the liberating, merciful, healing, comforting power of God for those who are suffering, sorrowful, oppressed. Of course, God comforts us. One of the other names for the Holy Spirit, of course, is the Comforter! But God doesn’t want us to be merely comfortable. God wants us to be holy - which is something rather else.

I was greeting folks after Evensong one-night last week when a gentleman approached me. He was visiting us from the U.K. And he told me how good it was to hear the familiar language of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible spoken in different accents than those he was used to. Father Moretz’s deep Georgian voice, I imagine, and my Midwestern one. He shared with me how hearing those familiar texts in new dialects gave him pause. Made him stop and consider the meaning of the prayers and the Scriptures, anew.

The familiar made suddenly strange. And then taken up again but with a new depth born of that arresting moment, in that flash of shock or surprise.

The Spirit of the Lord, the Lord from Nazareth: like a blazing fire, like a rush of wind...or a wild goose...moving in our midst.