

Going home ... and leaving town

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Rev. Patrick Raymond

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

Goin' home, goin' home, I'm a goin' home;
Quiet-like, some still day, I'm jes' goin' home.
It's not far, jes' close by,
Through an open door;
Work all done, care laid by,
Goin' to fear no more.

Some of you may recognize those first words from an enduringly popular song, penned a hundred years ago by William Arms Fisher. His lyrics were inspired by and set to a passage from Anton Dvorak's 9th symphony, described by Fisher as "*the outpouring of Dvorak's own home-longing [and] that nostalgia of the soul all human beings feel.*"¹

Goin' home, goin' home, I'm a goin' home ...

Many of us may be familiar with that *nostalgia of the soul all human beings feel*. We may connect that *nostalgia of the soul* with notions of home, and *goin' home*. We may also know the confusing and painful disconnect between the idealization and our actual experiences of 'home' and going home.

Someone there, when we go home, will be sure to dredge up the worst episodes from our adolescence. Or they will ask, "*How are things going 'back there'?*" not remembering if you'd moved to Idaho or Iowa or Indiana – when in fact it was Illinois, and it was 40 years ago, and you've lived in three other states since then. But they're not listening anyway. No one wants to revise the small town CLIFF NOTES about you that were written in stone so long ago and even then only told a small part of your story.

Goin' home, goin' home, I'm a goin' home ...

Jesus himself has been there, gone back to his hometown, according to the gospel we just heard. And things don't go any better for Jesus when he goes 'back home' than they have gone for some of us. "*On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded.*" To be clear, they are not *favorably* astounded. They are shocked and threatened, so much so that they begin to openly denigrate the preacher. "*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?*" Both designations – *carpenter* and *son of Mary* – are put-downs:

“Who does this uneducated carpenter think he is, preaching in our fine synagogue? And let’s not even honor him by mentioning his ‘father,’ Joseph.” They winked and smirked. Who could forget the out-of-wedlock pregnancy, all those years ago, and Mary’s naive tale about how she was ‘visited by an angel’? Just to make sure that we understand how his own hometown congregation responded to Jesus, the gospel author tells us that *‘they took offence at him.’*

Notice that we’re never told what Jesus had to say that day. Too bad. It might have been thrilling, ground-breaking, life changing. But the townspeople clearly weren’t open to anything new. What about us? What about when Jesus shows up and begins to disrupt our hometown synagogue, our comfort zones, the places where we have worked so hard to get things and people and ideas just the way we like them. “*Jesus could do no deed of power there ... he was amazed at their unbelief.*” So it was with the folks at the synagogue in the hometown of Jesus. So it may be in our own liturgical or theological or moral wax museums.

The townspeople and their resistance to Jesus so dominate this scene that we can easily miss the disciples of Jesus. They may be included here at the start of the scene, however fleetingly, to show us another way: “*Jesus ... came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.*” The word translated here as ‘follow’ is not the same word that we know from two earlier instances in this gospel, when Jesus had said ‘follow me’ to some of these same disciples. (Mark 1:17, 2:14) The *follow* used here is found only three times in the New Testament, and it employs the root of the Greek word for *road*. The author surely knew, and wanted us to know, that to *follow* Jesus, as the disciples continue to do, required them, and requires us, *be* ‘on the road’ and to *stay* on the road with Jesus. Will I stay hunkered down in my manageable, comfy hometown synagogue? Or will I get out on the exhilarating and, yes, sometimes-frightening but miracle-strewn open road with Jesus?

I hope you are listening ... Fr. George ... and Fiona. The message seems timely as you prepare to get on the road with Jesus, headed for Madison and the University of Wisconsin, and the Diocese of Milwaukee and St. Mark’s Church, Milwaukee. Please know of our gratitude for you, and our prayers.

I began this message by noting that it’s about *goin’ home*. But it’s also about leaving town, as Jesus and his disciples do at the end of today’s gospel scene. With regard to his hometown congregation, “*...he was amazed at their unbelief.*” But then he moved on and “*went about among the villages teaching.*” The Gospel of Mark mentions Jesus at home more than any other Gospel. This is his last time home. Some of us may be led to wonder about ‘leaving town’ ourselves, and doing so because we believe we are following Jesus. *Amen.*

¹ From William Arms Fisher’s notes for the 1st edition of the published sheet music for GOIN’ HOME, 1922.

