

## **The Hungry Spirit...Uncertain**

**Exodus 16:1-3; Mark 6:1-6**

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Life is about good news and bad news, isn't it? It's never all good news or all bad news. Life is a combination of both. Like the pastor who learned that his Deacons Council voted to send him on a trip to the Holy Land. He was excited—good news! Until he learned that they were stalling until the next war broke out!

Or there was the pastor who wrote his own job description and gave it to his personnel committee. The committee loved it. In fact, they were inspired by it. They were so inspired by it that they formed a search committee to find someone capable of filling it.

One more. It's about the pastor who learned that church attendance rose dramatically during the first three weeks of summer. Good news! Except that was when he was on vacation!

Okay, I know when you've had enough! My family will remind me at lunch that I'm no comedian. The real good news, bad news story is in Mark 6, when Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, a village of less than 2,000 people. I was tremendously honored to visit Nazareth last year. It appears to have been one of those small villages where everybody knew everybody. The adults knew the children of their neighbors. They watched them grow up, took an interest in their successes and failures. In Mark 6, Jesus returned to Nazareth but He was no longer the little boy next door. He was a man, a challenging, demanding figure. He had a small following and some acclaim, and in Mark 6 he returned home. Good news, right?

You never know exactly what's going to happen at a time like this, do you? Will you be received with fanfare or jealousy or something else? Jesus returned home, and He met with uncertainty, and as a result Mark says, "he could do no deed of power there."

The context of this return visit to home is significant. This incident comes immediately after Jesus has performed four great miracles. First, he

calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee. “Peace! Be still!” he said to the wind. “Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm,” Mark records. Next Jesus cast out demons from the man known as the Gerasene demoniac. Then Jesus healed a woman who had been ill for twelve years. She spent all her resources, Mark says, and grew only worse, until she touched the cloak of Jesus and was healed. While Jesus was still speaking to this woman, someone arrived with news that a little girl died. She was the daughter of the leader of the synagogue. Jesus said to her, “Little girl, get up!” And she did. The people were overcome with amazement.

With this succession of miracles, Mark presents Jesus as Lord over nature, Lord over demons, Lord over disease, and even Lord over death. Good news! Jesus was a miracle man who was Lord over all. Against that backdrop, Jesus went home to Nazareth and experienced what one New Testament scholar calls “an un-miracle” (Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation*, “Mark,” p. 114). There in his hometown, with those who knew him best, Mark says, “he could do no deed of power.” Bad news!

Listen to their uncertainty. Jesus was in the synagogue in Nazareth teaching. Mark says that the people were “astounded,” and asked, “Where did this man get all this?” Do you hear the uncertainty in that question? Then they asked, “What is this wisdom that has been given to him?” And then the third and most telling, “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?” Then Mark just spits it out, “And they took offense at him.” Literally, the Greek text here says that “they stumbled.” They were scandalized. One translation puts it succinctly, “they rejected him” (TEV).

Now as an interpreter of this text I have to ask, why? What happened in Nazareth to cause this reaction? My initial response is over familiarity. They knew too much about Jesus. They remembered his questionable birth. Maybe they remembered his pranks as a youngster. It’s hard to let youngsters grow up, you know, and be Lord. I certainly think that is part of what was happening, but I see something else happening in Nazareth. Remember, theirs was an honor-shame based culture. One must not shame the family. This still exists in some middle-eastern cultures. If a daughter brings shame upon the family, the father, brothers, and uncles extract what they think is just punishment. That’s the way it works. Remember, Jesus was a carpenter, a trained craftsman, who most likely belonged to a respected middle class. He was not part of the educated upper class that

studied the Law. By birth he was entitled to be a carpenter, but Jesus returned to Nazareth as a teacher, one who studied and taught the Law, an educated upper class to which he didn't belong. And they knew it!

“Where did he get all this?” they questioned. “What is this wisdom that has been given to him?” they challenged. “Is not this the carpenter?” they scorned. He should have been home taking care of his mother. If Joseph was dead by this time, as some speculate, Jesus should have been at home doing his duty. Instead, he ran off to who know where and then came back home pretending that he was some great teacher of the Law. What a *shame* for poor Mary!

Of all that Jesus may have said to the home crowd of Nazareth, this is all Mark chose to record. “Prophets are not without honor,” Jesus said, “except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Mark then adds, “he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”

The text begins with the people being amazed at Jesus and ends with Jesus being amazed at them. He was amazed at their unbelief. They were the ones who knew him best, and *right there is the message of this text*. They were the ones who knew him best, and therefore they should have been the first to follow. Instead they stumbled over the commonness of the bearer of God's message. They could not let him be who he was—Lord. They were scandalized to think that God could have done a great thing through the boy next door. Why, God was not at work in him. To the contrary, he was shaming his mother and the memory of his late father. And so they raised their doubt, their uncertainty, and will always be known as the village where Jesus grew up and the village first to reject him.

Good news and bad news. I see good news and bad news for the church in this story too. I sometimes wonder if the church today is a very large, well organized un-miracle story. We are the ones who claim to know him best. We are the ones who bear his name. But I fear that we are also the ones who resist letting him be who he is—Lord. To what degree, I ask you, is he Lord of your life? Lord of your thinking? Lord of your decisions, your priorities? To what degree do his message and life shape who we are? To what degree is the church today, our church, conformed to the image of Jesus Christ? And what deeds of power are being done among those who claim to know him best?

I know many of you are familiar with Dallas Willard, a professor at Fuller Seminary in California. My favorite of his books is titled *The Divine Conspiracy*. Professor Willard says that he wrote that book in order to gain a fresh hearing for Jesus. But his target audience is not the culture at large. His target audience is the church, “those who believe they already understand him,” Willard says. This is what Willard says about those who claim to know Jesus best. “Presumed familiarity has led unfamiliarity, unfamiliarity has led to contempt, and contempt has led to profound ignorance” (p. xiii). He says that the early message of Jesus was not something that people *had* to believe or *had* to do because otherwise something bad would happen to them. It was not about guilt or pressure. No, people who heard the message of Jesus concluded that it was truth, and they would be fools to disregard it. That was the basis of their conversion.

Today the church must be careful. We must not guilt people into conversion. We must not entertain them onto the church roles. We must not tell them that it is simply part of being a good citizen. We must do nothing to lessen the requirements of discipleship laid down by our Lord. If we do, we will spend the rest of our lives dancing ever faster to keep them coming. The church will do no deeds of power. And we all will sit in beautiful oak pews with a hungry spirit.

Uncertain. That’s what this story is about. Will we let him be Lord of our lives and Lord of our church? Or shall we send him on his way?

It’s Lent, a time for us to evaluate. Who are you? Why are you here? Jesus of Nazareth is the most challenging and demanding figure in human history. He’s no infant mild and lowly. He’s grown up now. He stands now in your pathway. What do you say about this man from Nazareth?

### Closing Prayer

Lord of Nazareth and Huntsville, awaken us to an awareness of who you are. Amen.