



TOUCH POINT

Where God Makes God's Home – Touchpoint for January 18, 2023

Matthew 4:12-23 (NRSVUE) ¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.”

It is an innocuous sort of line. Not one I had ever noticed or paid much attention to, until my trip to Israel and Jordan three years ago.

What difference did it make where Jesus made his home? Who cares where one lives? It wasn't written in red letters so why pay attention to it?

Except this. Capernaum is in Gentile country. Nowhere near Jewish territory. I want you to let that sink in. The one we think of as the fulfillment of Jewish law, and the Jewish sacrificial system, set up his home in Gentile country.

The one we so often believe can only be understood within a Jewish and subsequently Christian framework sets up his home base outside of Jewish territory, outside of Jewish rule, outside of Jewish structure.

If Jesus saw himself as only a Jewish messiah of a tribal deity, he certainly went about it in a strange way.

Understanding yourself as a Jewish messiah and then setting up your home base in Gentile country would be like setting your goal to be the best theater actor in the world, and then only doing community theater in Ajo, Arizona.

It doesn't make any sense.

There is a critique going on here. A critique of tribalism. It is a critique that any one group, any one system, can contain the whole of the Mystery.

Jesus may be Jewish, but his Abba – his daddy – is not. Just because I grew up exclusively Christian does not mean my heavenly father is. Just because I have always explained the divine Mystery in exclusively Christian terms doesn't mean that is the only way to speak of God. And no belief system that I or you can create, can ever contain the whole of the Mystery.

Or as John Shelby Spong put it:

“God is not a Christian, God is not a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist. All of those are human systems which human beings have created to try to help us walk into the mystery of God. I honor my tradition, I walk through my tradition, but I don't think my tradition defines God, I think it only points me to God.”

This bible verse is a healthy reminder that none of our well-manicured theologies or institutional hierarchies can contain the Divine. And a little humility might go a long way in our description of the Mystery. For God has made God's home amongst those whom we believe stand outside of God.

Jesus makes his home in the land of the Gentiles. Is there anything more telling than that?

Who is God for? The insider group or the outsider group? Who is the Divine for? Those who wish to define God or those who wish to follow God?

My friend Paul Evenson likes to say, *“We have made Christianity too much a religion ABOUT Jesus rather than the religion OF Jesus.”*

And what he means by that is that we spend most of our time trying to define Jesus – his divinity, his humanity... what are the proper titles for him... who do we say that he is... as if who we say Jesus is makes him that.

But what we fail to do is spend our time looking and following Jesus' beliefs about his Abba Father. What were Jesus' beliefs about the Mystery and who the Divine is... who the Divine is for?

He made his home in Capernaum, land of the Gentiles.

Is there any more of a clearer statement on who Jesus thought the Mystery is for?

And it is his beliefs that eventually got him killed. Because the powers that be can't exist without a 'them,' without a 'those people' to demonize and exclude. Leaders convince 'us' we need 'them' to protect us from 'those people.' Tribalism is our only protection.

But Jesus wasn't content to have a tribal God. A divine Mystery for only a select few.

He sets up his home base in Gentile country and goes from city to city, and town to town. He preaches in synagogues, yes, but he also heals in towns and villages of all kinds of people. Family members of the Roman occupying force. A gentile man filled with demons. Women, children. None of these are a part of the 'in' crowd... none of these are the blessed of the blessed.

And yet here is Jesus, setting up his home base, making his home, in them.

Perhaps Jesus is serious when he calls his fishermen disciples to come and net 'people.' If they are 'people,' they are to be caught up in the net of God's grace and mercy.

That's it. That's the criterion. At the beginning of the day, the net is cast out for all people. At the end of the day, all people are brought in.

It is such a different way of life. This 'netting of people.'

When you and I talk about what we net, we refer to money, possessions, acquisitions. What's your net 'worth'? What's your net 'income'? What's your net 'value'?

Jesus asks the question, "*What's your net 'people'?*"

Excuse me ... say what?

The question doesn't make any sense! Which only proves how far off base we have become. How out of whack our priorities are.

You see, to ask the question, "Who have you caught up in the grace and mercy of God through your life?" Or, "Who have you cast the net of divine love and forgiveness to?" This is to flip the whole of our faith from a self-centered narcissistic system to an outwardly-focused life. To see God not as an acquisition but as a shared experience, a shared encounter, especially in those we least expect.

What is it we are afraid of? Why do we always seek to contain, to fence in God's grace? Are we actually afraid we are going to out-grace God? Do we actually think we can out-forgive God?

Do we really think on judgment day, God is going to say to us, "*Well, off to Hell with you!!! You forgave more people than I do. You had mercy on more people than I wanted. You were just TOO GRACIOUS. To Hell with you all!!!*"

Seriously, it's laughable.

Let me try to put it as simply as possible.

The one who we say is "Immanuel, God with us," the one who we say is "The Word made flesh," the one who we say is "God in our presence" ... This one makes his home in a god-forsaken land with god-forsaken people. Which can only mean one thing – there is no god-forsaken land, and there are no god-forsaken people.

Period. End of sentence.

And if we think that God will only make God's home in you and me and people like us, then we negate the very life of Jesus. And we yank him from his home in Capernaum and turn him into a homeless person, which ironically is where he most finds himself at home – with the homeless.

Because as he said about the judgment day, "*I was hungry, a stranger, and you welcomed me.*" And in another place, "*Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*"

Apparently, God can even make Godself at home where there is no home.

Like in the heart of a betrayer, and a denier. And a doubter and some cowards. Like in you and me in this meal.

I can't recall at the moment who said it, but someone once said, "There is only one thing that makes Holy Communion valid, and that is this..."

There is one person present who doesn't deserve to be there...

And sometimes that person is you!!!

In the god-forsaken areas of our lives, the divine Mystery wishes to make a home. In the dis-membered areas of our lives, the Mystery wishes to be re-membered.

Because you see, there is no god-forsaken space. And there are no god-forsaken people. Not you, or me, or even 'those people.'

God finds God's home in all of us.

All are caught up in the net of God's grace. All swim in God's sea of forgiveness.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Calm Me Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Dwell Among Us

(Salt of the Sound)

Keep moving and living and breathing in us
Keeping working and singing and speaking through us
You dwell among us...
With all this life I long to see, more of You and less of me
Lord send Your spirit here to work in us

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

Sevenfold Amen

(The Emmanuel Quartet)

Amen.