

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

Luke 14:14-22 and others

“You can’t go home again.” At least that’s what they say.

I don’t know if that is always true, and I don’t know who “they” are that say it, but I do know Jesus experienced the reality of that statement. Luke, the historian, records, “Jesus returned to Galilee...He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up...” (Luke 4:14, 16). Before looking at the story of His return, I have to ask myself, “Where did Jesus go?”

According to the story, Jesus had just returned home from His baptism and desert temptation (Luke 3). However, I think there is more to the narrative than that. Luke writes, “and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom. And He stood up to read” (Luke 4:16). Not just anyone was allowed to read and make comments in the synagogue. Only a teacher (or “rabbi”) was permitted to do so. At some point in His life, Jesus left home a carpenter’s son and returned a rabbi.

How did that transition take place? How did Jesus become a rabbi? Why did He announce His ministry in the synagogue?

From *Bet Sefer* to *Beth Midrash* to *Talmid* to *Rabbi*

The Torah (meaning “teaching” or ‘way’; referring to the first 5 books of the Old Testament) was everything to the Jewish people. Education meant survival, and so, central to their survival was Torah education. Jesus would have begun His formal training in the Torah at age 6. His first level of training, called “bet sefer” (meaning “house of the book”) would last

until He was 12 years of age (similar to our elementary school). During “bet sefer,” Jesus would have gone to school at the local synagogue and would have been taught by the “hazzan”¹, or the local rabbi (“Torah teacher”). A large part of the educational process was memorizing the Torah. In Jesus’ day, most adults knew most of the Old Testament by heart.

At age 12, Jesus would have begun studying the oral interpretations of the Torah. At this stage of His education, question-and-answer times between student and teacher were common.² Between the ages of 13 to 15, gifted students were chosen from among the boys to continue their studies with a local rabbi in “beth midrash” (meaning “house of study”, similar to our secondary schools). Those boys who were not chosen would return home to learn the family business. Assuming Jesus was chosen to continue His studies, during “beth midrash” He would have learned to apply the Torah and oral traditions to every day life.

From “beth midrash” were chosen the truly gifted students to travel and study with a famous rabbi as a “talmid” (meaning “disciple”). During this time in His life, Jesus would have left home to follow His rabbi anywhere the rabbi went. Around the age of 30, a “talmid” would be considered a “rabbi” and would begin his public ministry. And so, at the age of 30, Jesus returned home, to His synagogue, was recognized as a rabbi, and asked to read from the prophet Isaiah.

The Importance of the Synagogue

¹ The “hazzan” was the caretaker of the synagogue. He was responsible for maintaining the building and organizing prayer services. In smaller villages (like Nazareth) he taught the synagogue school. The hazzan would also announce the Sabbath by blowing the shofar (ram’s horn), and he cared for the Torah scrolls and other sacred writings.

² Remember that when Jesus’ parents found him in the Temple at age 12 he was both answering questions and asking questions. What he was doing was the customary way of learning and studying the oral interpretations of the Torah during “beth midrash.”

The synagogue (“assembly”) was the center of life for the Jewish community. The synagogue provided identity for the people and served as a place for school, public meetings, prayer, worship, courtroom, and lodging for travelers. In Jesus’ day most Galilean towns had a synagogue. Outside the synagogue was a “mikveh” (“ritual bath”), where people would symbolically clean themselves before entering for worship. Once inside, along three walls, were “chief seats,” where important people sat. Everyone else sat on the dirt floor. Teachers, speakers, and readers stood on the “bema” (a small platform), and on the bema was a small “menorah” (a candlestick like the one in the Temple).

Every Friday evening, as soon as the first three stars could be seen, the *hazzan* blew the shofar, announcing that the Sabbath had begun. Most families would gather for the Sabbath meal, and then go to the synagogue the following morning for worship. Worship in the synagogue included blessings, a recitation of the Shema,³ and several readings from the Torah. The hazzan would have been the one to bring out the scrolls, but the passages to be read were assigned according to a predetermined schedule.

After the Torah readings, the prophets were read, followed by a short sermon on what the prophet said.⁴ If a visiting rabbi was present, he would be asked to read from the prophets and share his thoughts on what it meant.

And so Jesus, who had returned home, was asked to read. By God’s providence, when He was handed the scroll to read, the assigned text for the day was a prophecy about the coming Messiah from the prophet Isaiah; and because most of the people in the synagogue had most of the Old Testament memorized, they would know if Jesus was reading correctly.

³ The “Shema” was the basic confession of faith for a Jew. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

⁴ The reading of the prophets was called “haphtarah”; and the short sermon was called “derashah.”

Standing before His hometown friends and relatives, Jesus reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19)⁵

By Jesus’ day the anticipation that a Messiah was soon coming was at a fever pitch. Thus, what Jesus read would have caused excitement, in and of itself. The fact this young, new rabbi, was going to comment on these prophecies caused everyone to sit up straight and listen. Jesus’ sermon, consisting of nine words, brought strong reactions. He startled them by saying, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah! He was telling His family and friends, those who knew Him best and knew Him when, that He had been called by God to bring redemption and restoration to God’s people.

How did the crowd react? “All the people in the synagogue were furious...They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff” (Luke 4:28-29).

Not exactly what you would expect, or is it?

A “Calling” from God

How do you explain a “calling” from God to your friends and family? What does it mean to say, “God has called me...”? How do you know? How do you communicate your experience to others? The situation is especially complicated when you try to explain it to friends and family who are not followers of Jesus, or who are not as committed to Him as you.

⁵ The quote was from Isaiah 61:1-2.

What does it mean to say you are “committed” to Jesus? Sometimes being committed means spending time in a psych ward. Is being “committed to Jesus” a fanatical, crazy idea?

I think some people like keeping their commitment to Jesus quiet. That way there is no accountability. I mean, if you tell someone of your intentions to do something great for Jesus, they will watch you, closely, and point out every flaw and misstep along the way. It’s easier to keep some things between you and God, that way no one knows...except you and God. Why bring unnecessary attention to yourself? Why set yourself up for public humiliation?

Randy felt God calling him to be a minister when he was 15 years old. Actually, the first time he felt God calling, he was 12 years old; but that was at a youth camp one summer during an emotional campfire service. Three years later, at age 15, he knew God was talking to Him. But how could he tell and how could he explain it to others. Randy was a good kid, but he was known to swear once in a while; and he did other things that people, called by God, don’t do. Who would believe him, when he said, “God has called me to...?”

One evening, Randy got up the nerve to tell his dad how he was feeling and thinking. Surely his dad would understand, for he too had been called by God into ministry. But his dad stunned him. He said, “Randy, if you can do anything else in life and be happy, do it.”

What does that mean? Had God not called him? And there’s that word again, “called.”

Several months passed, and Randy could not shake this feeling of being “called.” One hot Sunday evening, he went before his church and announced that God had “called” him into ministry. The people at church—especially the older people—were thrilled. Randy, after all, was a good boy. Now, all the adults watched him, hoping he would influence their sons and daughters. There is a lot of pressure in being “called.”

A few months after his big announcement, Randy preached his first sermon. It was in Children's Church and lasted ten whole minutes. He talked about baseball and the children loved him. "Maybe God has called me," he thought. Other speaking opportunities followed, and it seemed God had called Randy, but not everyone agreed. One pastor bluntly told him that God had not called him. But the "feeling" that God had "called" him would not leave.

What does it feel like to be "called"?

It's not the same feeling you have when you are cold, or hot, or hungry. It's not something you can point to and say, "That's what it feels like." It's more like an inner knowing. It's something that is deep inside a person; something you cannot shake or escape. It keeps you up at night. It haunts you. It's something that says, "You will not be happy doing anything else." Just like Randy's dad said.

Maybe being "called" by God is not so much what God does, but how you respond to what God has already done, and is doing, in your life. If that's true, then we all have been called. It's just that very few have answered "yes."

To be called by God means placing your life in God's hands, and not in the opinion of others. To be called by God means following Him, fulfilling His purpose in your life, even when other people question you. And at times, it is your friends and relatives that cause you to doubt God's calling the most.

Behold, the Lamb of God...I Think

After Jesus read from Isaiah in His home synagogue, the people did not believe him, and so Jesus said, "No prophet is accepted in his home town" (Luke 4:24). On another occasion, as

people were crowding around Jesus, wanting His time and attention, His family came looking for Him, saying, “He is out of His mind” (Mark 3:21). Imagine that! Jesus thought He was called by God. His family thought He was crazy.

How do you explain to your family that what you feel deep inside is what God wants you to do?

John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, the one who baptized Him, said of Him, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, 36). John knew that God had called him to go before the Messiah, preparing the way. He believed Jesus to be the Messiah. But then, from prison, John started doubting who Jesus was. John sent word to Jesus, asking, “Are You the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3).

Sometimes, even our best friends doubt who we are, and who we claim to be.

Jesus was so good at being human that it took awhile for people to believe He had been called by God to reconcile the world. He was so good at being human that it was hard to believe He was God. For most of His family and friends, it took rising from the dead to convince them. And you know what? If someone in my family (like one of my brothers) claimed to be God’s Son, it would take something no less dramatic than a resurrection to convince me. After all, I remember them when...

The problem is that God still calls people who, like Jesus, are very good at being human. Moses was an orphaned child, who was guilty of murder, and whose only skill was being a shepherd. But God called Moses to deliver the Israelites from bondage. Gideon was a timid farmer, with no dreams of being a military hero, but God called him to lead 300 men in one of the greatest military victories in history. There was nothing unusual about David, or Daniel, of

Jeremiah, or Deborah, or Mary, or any of the Disciples. Each was no more, or no less, a human than you and I.

Called By God

There are some things God calls everyone to do and be. God calls everyone to believe in Jesus. The Bible says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). It is clear from Scripture, and obvious from observation, that not everyone will choose to believe, not everyone answers the call to faith, but that is God’s calling none-the-less.

God also calls everyone to obey His teachings. Through his Word, God tells us what we need to know, and what we need to do, in order to live a fulfilled life. Through his Word we learn how to live and how not to live. The Psalmist wrote, “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). One of God’s teachings is that we share our faith with others. Thus, another calling God has placed on everyone’s life is to be an ambassador for Him. Further, God has called his followers to use their spiritual gifts in ministry.

There are other things God calls you to do, specifically, and no one else can do them like you. It is this unique calling that usually confuses us, and at times scares us. Unfortunately, we only apply this type of calling to being a pastor, or a missionary. Yet, more often than not, in the Bible, when God calls a person, He calls them to something outside of ministry. Scripture is full of examples where God called people to the marketplace, to build buildings (or a boat), to cut jewelry, to dig ditches, to take notes for someone else, to play music, to heal the sick, and to

build roads. (And again I repeat: *These “secular” occupations were callings God placed on people’s lives.*)

I believe God still calls people. He calls some into ministry, but He calls most into some other type of life. God calls people to be a teacher, or a truck driver, or a doctor, or a website designer, or a salesman, or an electrician, or...(whatever it is you do for a living). To be called by God means to know without a doubt that what you are doing—whatever you are doing—is exactly what God wants you to be doing. God’s calling is His personal invitation for you to get involved in building his kingdom by using your talents and gifts in significant, eternal ways. Answering God’s call is completely submitting yourself to His will for your life. Thus, God’s call is not about you, but about Him.

Bruce and Debbie felt God calling them to a specific place for a specific job. Bruce was a well respected engineer at a nuclear plant—God had called him to be an engineer. They had a nice life, with a nice home, and two teenage children. But they felt called by God to leave their comfortableness behind and move to a third world country to help build a school. So Bruce quit his job, raised his support, and moved his family to a foreign country. Four years later, the school was built. They fell in love with the people in this South American Country, but felt God calling them once again.

Where did God want Bruce and Debbie to go next? God was calling them back home! They struggled with this calling. What would other people think? Would they be seen as quitting? But the call to return home was just as strong, and just as spiritual, as the call to move. The call to be an engineer was just as much a calling as the call to be a missionary. And not obeying that call would have been just as disobedient. Bruce is once again a respected engineer

at a nuclear plant; and they are doing exactly what God wants them to do, where God wants them to do it.

Is Anyone Home?

How do you know God is calling you?

If you are a living, breathing human being, God is calling you. He is calling you to faith in Jesus Christ. He is calling you to a higher life of obedience. He is calling you to share your faith and use your spiritual gifts. He is calling you to use your talents and skills for His honor and glory. As you answer God's call on these things, and open up the lines of your heart for further communications with the God of the universe, He will direct you to the specific calling, or task, that He has for you.

How do you know you are living within that call? Athletes call it being in a "zone"; being in that place where the game slows down and you can see clearly what needs to be done to win. The fat part of a baseball bat is called the "sweet spot." Hit the ball on the sweet spot and it will go farther, harder, and faster, than anywhere else on the bat. Living inside God's calling for your life is living in the "zone" or in the "sweet spot." It's a wonderful place to be; and when you are living in the zone, you know it. How?

You know you are in the zone when there is a calmness in your soul that God is in control, regardless of the comfort or chaos that is going on around you. A person, living within God's calling for his life, is secure and satisfied and content. Your heart is settled, you are able to live in the here and now, without worrying about tomorrow; and you are enjoying the journey.

When you are in your “sweet spot” you are joining God in what He is already doing, not begging Him to fit into your plans. The Bible calls this “abiding in Christ” (John 15:4).

When you know God has called you, you walk by faith, regardless of what anyone else says or thinks. There will be times in your journey, following Jesus, where people will question your motives, your competency, your calling, even your sanity. At other times, people who at one time believed in you and your calling, will start to doubt. More often than not, these doubters will be your friends and family, and church leaders.

When you know God has called you, you walk by faith even though, from a human perspective, it makes no sense. The Bible says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

When God has spoken into your heart, giving you a clear direction and calling, listen to Him. Obey Him. Press into Him. You will not be happy doing anything else.