

I wonder what it was like for Jesus to leave them in his dust.

The people of Nazareth had acted poorly. Jesus, their hometown boy, knew what buttons to push. And when he pushed them, they got mad. Who did Jesus think he was, rubbing their noses in God's love for foreigners like Naaman the Syrian and the widow of Zarephath? His hometown loved his first sermon. Didn't that count for something? They were amazed at his teaching. Was it too much to ask that he work a few miracles in his old neighborhood like he had done in wild and crazy Capernaum, the Asheville of Galilee? Apparently, the Nazarenes *were* asking too much because Jesus picked a fight, and told them their lifelong connection to him was actually a disadvantage. Who they remembered him to be or wanted him to be was getting in the way of who he was. Jesus was the savior of *the world*, not just the redeemer of congressional district #2. And Nazareth took offense at that.

It hardly ever goes well when the little kid you once babysat grows up and starts scolding you, not after all you've done for him, even if he is telling the truth. The Nazarenes were so mad at Jesus for getting above his raising that they hurried him out to the edge of a cliff. They were going to kill him. But then, the Bible says, Jesus walked through the midst of them, unscathed,

like God was on his side or something. The last they saw of him he was heading out the town gate, leaving his home town behind.

I wonder what it was like to stand there, looking at Jesus from the back, to watch the bottom of his sandals flip flop into the sunset, to know that he was able and willing to break his ties with them.

I have some core beliefs that have meant a lot to me over the years. One of them is that God never leaves or forsakes us. Many of you are right with me, and no doubt you could quote Romans 8:39. Nothing will separate us from the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Whether we are in the storm or in the sunshine, even if death is right around the corner, while we are suffering the worst anguish of our lives, God is with us, loving us, sustaining us, holding us when we don't have anything else to hold on to. I couldn't live without this comfort. We believe God is with us always, and we believe this because Jesus told us so and lived so all the way to the cross.

But today's reading reminds us of the other side of the truth. While God is with us, God won't be controlled by us. God meets us right where we live, but God has other work to do, also, outside of the local neighborhood, and doesn't have much time for us to pout about it. If we want to tie God down to our place, and remake him according to our desires, God knows how to break

free. God knows the way into town and God knows the way out.

So as soon as Jesus's old friends began to trim him down to fit the mold they had made for him, Jesus took off. God-with-us became God-leaving-us-behind.

Can you tell me what that would feel like?

Well, at least now we know who's following who. Every gospel makes it clear that we follow Jesus, not the other way around. He came to serve, no doubt about it, and to give his life as a ransom for many. But he's not our bell hop. He's our leader. Not only does he meet us where we are, he also draws us to himself, forming a new community with his agenda at its heart. Whenever we confine him to our interests, whenever we get jealous and want to keep him to ourselves, whenever we insist on being the center of his attention, expect him to pick a fight. God-with-us, Immanuel, breaks free to pursue his larger mission, to be who he is, the savior of the world. Jesus knows when to be God-not-with-us, too.

Of course, if Jesus is headed somewhere faithful, he would prefer that we come along. His goal isn't to reject us. He'd be happy for us to break free, too.

A lot is about to happen in the gospel of Luke. If we're willing to hit the road with Jesus, we'll see it for ourselves: sick people made well; left out people brought in; hard-nosed sinners

forgiven and changed all the way down to the bone; blind folks seeing again. We will hear Jesus declare favor on the disfavored; and his wisdom in parables and proverbs will grab us and not let go. We'll watch him pay attention to women, and make them a part of his grand operation. Finally, we'll be with him in the agony of his death and the joy of his resurrection. These gifts are waiting for all who will travel behind him on the way to Easter. Come along, and these wonders are yours.

But today, we're taking note not so much of the gift of *being* with Jesus as the gift of *leaving* with him. If we follow Jesus, we have permission to leave behind all that oppresses and stifles us from our upbringing, everything from our originating culture that sucks the life out of us and forces us into a shape that doesn't fit. We get to show the bottom of our sandals to expectations that don't match our purpose and destiny. It's so hard to break ties with our origins. We don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, and we are so grateful for the many gifts that have come to us out of that social matrix we call home. But to the degree home won't let us live the life we've been given, Jesus helps us break free.

I wonder what it would be like for us to leave Nazareth behind.

This story didn't actually happen and it most certainly has.

A pastor served several medium sized churches in the Midwest, one right after another. And his wife, Mrs. Pastor, tried to be the best minister's wife ever. She took three dishes to the covered dish dinners instead of two like everyone else. She taught children's Sunday School, led one of the circles, served in church camps, checked all the restrooms to make sure they were clean. She even preached a few times when her husband was away. And the churches clapped their hands, and thought silly things like her children would be less likely to have problems, given what a great mother she was; and that she was less likely to have problems, given how devoted she was; and how they all wanted to be close to her so a little bit of God might rub off.

Then Mrs. Pastor's Wife got sick, real sick. She wasn't at church for two months. When she came back, she wasn't her usual cheery self. She resigned from the circle and found someone else to teach the children's Sunday School class. Sometimes she came to the potlucks and sometimes she didn't. Concerned elders asked the pastor if she was okay. The pastor said, "She's getting better." The next day she told the Christian education chair she would help with snacks, but she wouldn't be directing Vacation Bible School again. No more two for the price of one.

What happened? Well, in my opinion, it was time to leave Nazareth. She had a God-given life to live that might or might not fit expectations. She left town, you'll notice, without changing her physical location one inch. Time to be free.

By a young age, Kevin knew what his family wanted. They wanted him to be a doctor, especially his father. Kevin came from a long line of very smart people. And his father hoped Kevin would use his brain to excel and achieve. But Kevin, likewise very smart, didn't want to become a doctor. He wanted to become a pastor. A pastor? Anybody with half a brain could be a pastor. Kevin's father was very disappointed.

Kevin was so smart he became a professor and moved to New York to teach in seminary. He attended a church in Harlem. Up to then his faith had been an intellectual exercise, but the gospel came emotionally alive for him in that church in Harlem. After a few years, he decided to move back home. "But that would be dangerous," his friends told him. Kevin moved back home anyway.

Home was Germany in the late 1930s. Home said Jews were evil and Hitler was Lord. Kevin and others like him said no to both, and had to go underground to keep their faith alive. Kevin and his friends attempted to assassinate Hitler. When the planned

failed, he was sent to jail, where he became a trusted pastor to the guards. They say some of them cried the day Kevin was executed.

His real name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. What a beautiful life he lived, full of grace and truth, made possible when he left a few things back in Nazareth: his father's heavy expectations, cultural delusions and idolatry. Notice he was back in Nazareth when he died, and yet he wasn't trapped at all. He was free.

I wonder what it would look like if you left Nazareth behind you. What's oppressive, stultifying, an inheritance you didn't ask for that drains the life out of you and keeps you from living the life you were destined to live? Maybe it's time to tell your extended families to keep their noses out of your husband's and your business. You are ready to make plans and mistakes all on your own. Maybe you have a calling under your skin, crawling to get out, and for your own health it's time to share it with those who are never going to understand. Perhaps it's time to sluff off some of your crude and misguided assumptions about gay people, so you can love your granddaughter. Can you walk through the internal and external resistance, strong as it is, like God is on your side or something, and be free?

Nazareth, we are so grateful for you. We wouldn't be us without you. But we can't let you get in the way of our God-given

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lives. Us with God now. First, God with us in Jesus. Now us with
Jesus, leaving what we need to leave behind.

Wonder what that would feel like.