

## *Our Lineage* – Luke 4:14-21

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If we say to ourselves, “It’s in our DNA,” we’re probably not talking about the genetic code that links us to generations of long-lost relatives. (Although, I know several of us who study our ancestries and have a deep interest in who we are genetically linked to over many centuries.)

No, when we say, “It’s in our DNA,” we’re more likely referring to those qualities about ourselves that we can’t erase—our likes, dislikes, behavior tendencies, and desires. Or, we tend to refer to those who have gone before us and our links to them that dictate our current behavior and yearnings.

It’s striking that in these two readings from scripture today, the main characters in these stories are relying on traditions of their ancestors to help them manage their lives and define who they will be going forward. Their roots would bring them comfort and clarity.

In this passage from Nehemiah, the prophet Ezra brought the book of the law of Moses to the assembled body.

“The people gathered by the water tower longed for a word of the Lord and begged to hear the law of Moses. They wept when Ezra read aloud the will and wisdom of their God.

“Why were they weeping? Was it because they, too, wondered where in their world God’s good news resounded in the ears of the poor? Was it because they questioned when the Scripture would be fulfilled in their hearing? Or was it because the oppressed did not appear free; many remained captive to poverty, violence, fear, addiction and the list went on. Did the

people weep by the water tower because they had fallen short of the glory of God or because God's glory felt distant from them?

“Nehemiah and Ezra looked upon the people, grieved and weeping, and told them their reaction was all wrong. Rejoicing - not crying - was in order. Celebrate and do not mourn, they commanded. ‘Throw a party, don't wail in lament.’ The joy of the Lord was their strength. The joy of the Lord, not their circumstances nor the conditions of the world, should dictate their mood, their wellbeing, their outlook.” (Jilly Duffy, *Presbyterian Outlook*)

After hearing the word, the people responded with the words, “Amen, Amen.” And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

In their time of crisis, this people went back to their roots, what was in their DNA. They went back to the Word of the Lord. And the Word of the Lord got them through.

Here in the gospel text, Jesus physically and spiritually returns to his roots. He went back to his home region of Galilee and his hometown of Nazareth. He was raised there. His mother's roots were in Nazareth. This was the early days of his ministry, and he goes back home to be with his people. Maybe he was frustrated with the encounters he had been having with total strangers. Maybe he didn't think they understood him. Maybe he was homesick of some sort. And he just had to be back with the people who had raised him and with whom he shared a heritage.

So, in Nazareth, he goes to the synagogues, also places of comfort to him. And he begins teaching there. He stands up to read, and what he reads is not at all foreign to him. For in his reading of the scroll of Isaiah, he returns to his spiritual roots. He

reads words that were familiar to him and instructive to him as a Jewish boy who worshipped in the synagogue with his family.

And the words he read aloud were affirmations of his identity.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he quotes Isaiah, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Why did he read these words aloud to the gathered crowd in the synagogue? To bolster his own spirits and reassure himself of his chosen role? To instruct those who were listening of this special divine identity he had? Maybe all of the above.

Jesus goes back to what he knows, what’s familiar, and finds comfort and inspiration for the challenging journey ahead. In his hometown and in these words of holy instruction, he falls back on his roots to lead him forward.

In a very mobile society in which we live today, and in a culture that blindsides us with messages of all varieties and in all forms, we have trouble at times finding our way home so to speak. We move our address from place to place, following job and career in order to ascend the ladder of success and make ends meet. We make and lose friends in the process, casualties of our persistent shuffling from place to place. We latch onto theories and dogmas based upon our changes in address and our changes in perspective that come with growing older. As parents, our kids grow up. And as they do, we’re forced to consider their perspectives on life and how they may be different from ours. And they may in fact influence how we think about the world.

And with all these persistent changes, it's no wonder that we long for reattaching ourselves to our heritage. We long for home, a place or, most assuredly, a reassurance of who we are. And as people of faith, that means finding that connection once again to God's word and the people who make the Word come alive—the church.

Sports fans find their identities partly around their favorite teams, employees find their identities partly through the organization that employs them. Neighbors find their identities partly through the neighborhoods in which they live.

And Christians find their identities through aspects of their common life, which is found in their church. It's in our spiritual DNA

The most significant identity we have as the church is our worshiping life.

“It's one of the primary ways we express our identity and purpose. By gathering as a community, opening the book of God's Word, proclaiming it aloud, and reflecting on its meaning, we engage in a communal encounter with the divine. In both Jewish synagogue services and Christian assemblies, the biblical Word is not merely read privately but proclaimed as a shared experience involving the entire gathered community.” (Hymn Society in the U.S.)

Each of us doesn't agree on everything regarding who God is or God's teaching. We give ourselves plenty of room to ask questions, debate, and have our minds changed. And yet, despite these differences, we still gather together to encounter the divine. And with our varied gifts and takes on God and our faith, we find a unity in this place as we hear a Word from the God who made us.

I've said this many times here over the last decade and I'll say it again because it's so special: This family of faith here is built around people who don't agree with each other on every issue of faith, politics, or culture. There's a wide variety of thoughts and perspectives regarding God, how to act in Godly ways, who to vote for, or how the Tennessee Vols can better win the big games.

But despite that diversity, we gather around the Word every week--together. And in this regard, there's no daylight between us. We're in lock-step in our desire to worship and sense the divine in our presence.

Beyond worship, we're also united through our desire to belong to each other. And this belonging comes by the ways we are in community beyond our worshiping life: Small group bible studies, or dinner groups, or golf groups, or sewing groups, yoga classes, and book clubs.

Those groups reflect the same spirit we have here on Sunday mornings: a belief that we are incredibly blessed by a God who blesses us. And we respond to that blessing by welcoming and joining with others in our common life as thankful children of God. It's in our DNA.

And we have the opportunity to invite others to share in this lineage. We can welcome others into this community of openness and respect so that others might claim their heritage as children of God, too.

A new life takes shape in a community in which we know that God loves and accepts us as we are. That's our lineage; that's our joyful ancestry.