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# Where Jesus Walked: A Spiritual Journey through the Holy Land

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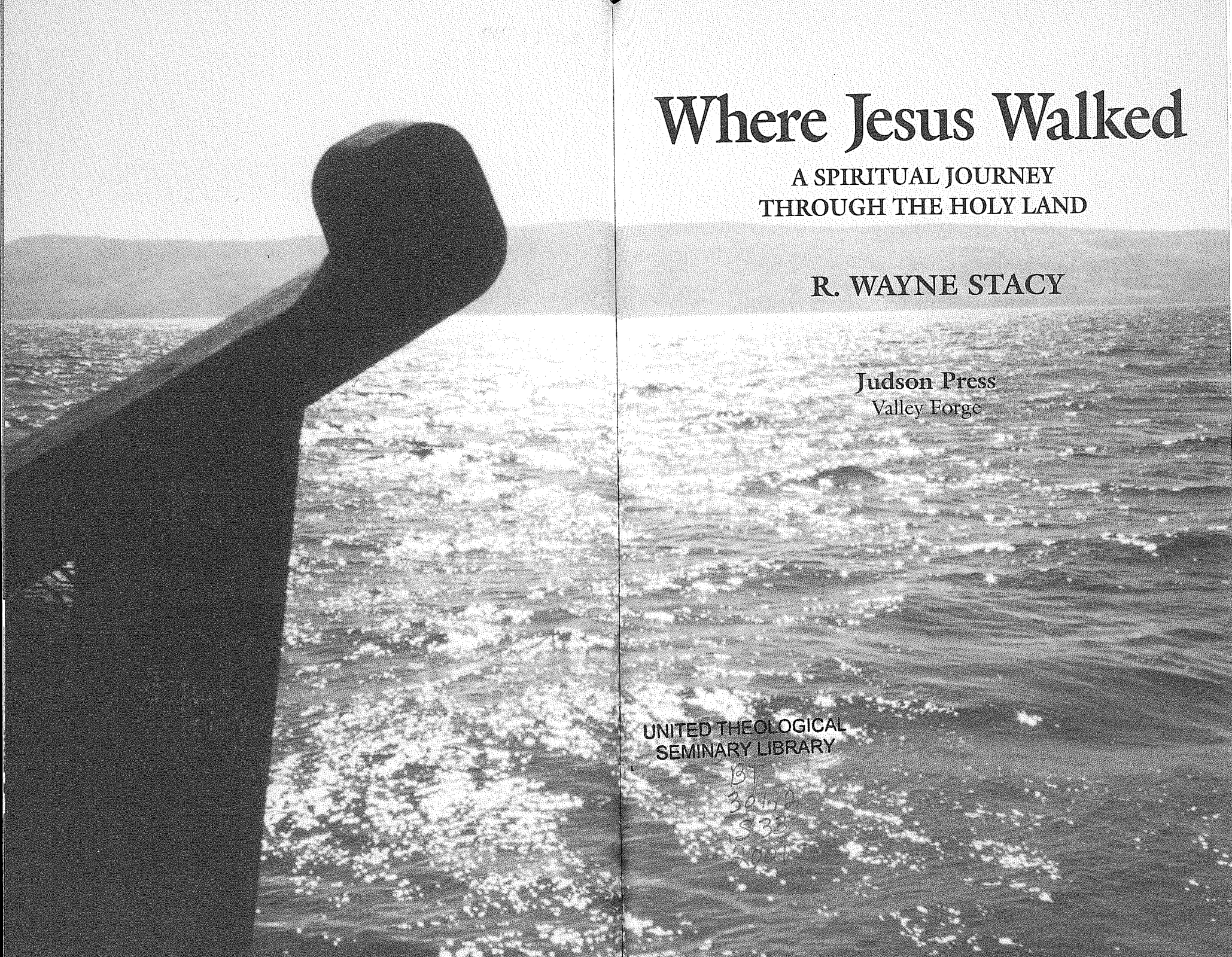
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# Where Jesus Walked

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY  
THROUGH THE HOLY LAND

R. WAYNE STACY

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*A Spiritual Journey through the Holy Land*

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*For Cheryl*

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For years I have led groups of students/pilgrims to the Holy Land. You would think that by now I would be used to it—the responses of amazed and astonished people who look out in disbelief at Palestinian vistas about which they had read and heard but never seen until that moment. Typically, there is a skeptic along, someone who protests the idolatry of place that regards this land as uniquely “holy.”

“Well, you can worship God anywhere. There’s nothing ‘holy’ about this land as opposed to any other land. God is everywhere, and every land is ‘holy land.’”

And it’s true! God is everywhere, and the Incarnation means, among other things, that every land is “holy land,” now that Jesus has walked and eaten and slept and died on it.

But then, slowly, imperceptibly at first, this place that Walter Brueggemann simply called *The Land*<sup>1</sup> does its thing, works its magic, and before they know it even the skeptics find themselves “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” I have stood there and watched them become immobilized

by the presence of God on the lake Jesus called Gennesaret. I have witnessed a kind of spiritual paralysis in the Garden Tomb as the curious became, in spite of themselves, captured by a place whose power over them they could neither deny nor evade.

It is a long journey from the States to the Holy Land, but not nearly as long as the journey from head to heart. It is one matter to know a thing, but it is another matter altogether to *know* a thing. And somehow, in ways fraught with mystery, faith needs a place to nourish and nurture it from nascency to maturity. I had studied the Bible all my life; I had taught it in college and seminary. I knew the history of God's self-revelation through the people of Israel and through Jesus of Nazareth as well as anyone. But when I made my first trip to the Holy Land, I discovered that I had to learn all over again what I didn't know that I didn't know. And now, I read the Bible with new eyes.

For reasons none of us can fathom, God chose this place among all places as the one in which to move from idea and feeling to bone and sinew. That God would be born at all is outrageous. And yet, once upon a time, long ago and far away, a baby who was "very God of very God," as one creed says, lay in the crook of a woman's arm, born with a skull so small you could crush it one-handed, as a contemporary believer once put it.<sup>2</sup> That this baby would be born in this place and not some other place is at best a curiosity, at worst a scandal. In fact, that's precisely what the scholars call it: the "scandal of particularity." But that this place reveals something of the ineffable mystery that is God as nowhere else in the world is outrageous. And yet, that is what the Bible claims. It describes a God who became incarnate, "fleshed in," as it were, at a particular time, in a particular place, rather than some nebulous, universal idea or concept not delimited to a particular moment in history. That is to say, there is a geography of

revelation as well as a history of revelation. And once you have experienced the geography of revelation, "God's geography," if you will, you will never read the history of revelation in quite the same way.

The reason this is so, I think, is accessibility. We have access to the geography of revelation in a way in which we do not have access to the history of revelation. Faith needs access to its object, and though I cannot travel back in time, I can go to the place. And once I have been to the place, distance in time somehow seems less an obstacle to faith.

Indeed, some things Jesus says in the Gospels make no sense anywhere else in the world but in this place. For example, in Mark's Gospel (11:20–25) Jesus and the disciples, staying in Bethany, probably with their friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (cf. Luke 10:38–42), shuttle back and forth from Bethany and Bethphage over the Mount of Olives down through the Kidron Valley to Jerusalem, where Jesus daily engages his critics in the temple. On his first such visit, Jesus "cleansed" the temple, creating quite a stir by overturning the tables of the money-changers and merchandisers and pronouncing a curse on a fig tree because it did not bear fruit. The two actions were related: the temple, like the fig tree, stood "cursed" by Jesus because it too was not "bearing fruit"; that is, not doing what it was intended to do in bringing persons to God. On the next day, Jesus, with his disciples in tow, passed the fig tree he had cursed the previous day, and the disciples noticed that it had withered away at its roots (again, a parable of what would happen to the temple). And Jesus, sensing here a teachable moment, said to his disciples something that has puzzled commentators for years: "Have the faith of God. Amen, I tell you, that if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will happen, it will be [done] for you" (Mark 11:22–23).

And the commentators speculate about why Jesus used the image of moving mountains and casting them into the sea in order to illustrate the capacity of faith. Why would anyone want to throw a mountain into the sea? Was it just oriental hyperbole? No, it wasn't. Remember that, according to Mark, Jesus said this on his way from Bethany to the temple in Jerusalem. The path, still walked today by Palm Sunday pilgrims, takes you over the Mount of Olives, at the summit of which, on a clear day, you can see both the Herodian to the south and the Dead Sea to the east, with the temple mount lying off to the west, directly across the Kidron Valley from you. The Herodian was the tomb of Herod the Great, which Herod had built by excavating one mountain and using the excavated material to build another—his Herodian. At the time, it was regarded as such a feat of engineering that it was said of Herod that he could literally “move mountains.” And Jesus, standing on the Mount of Olives, looking at Herod's mountain, uses it as an on-site object lesson and says, in effect, to his disciples, “You think that's great? That's nothing. If you have the faith of God, you can say to Herod's mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the Dead Sea,’ and it will be as you've said.” Standing in that place, and only in that place, Jesus' seemingly nonsensical statement suddenly makes perfect sense.

So significant is the geography of revelation for understanding the history of revelation that Benedictine archaeologist Father Bargil Pixner likens the Land to a kind of “fifth Gospel.” Reading the four Gospels in light of the fifth Gospel makes them come alive in a way in which they could not have otherwise.

And that is the purpose of this book—to lead you to reflect with me on the places “where Jesus walked” as a kind of fifth Gospel. Each chapter begins by introducing you to one of the places that, according to the four

Gospels, figured prominently in Jesus' life. A description of the geography, topography, history, and archaeology of the site is followed by a new translation (my own) of a Scripture passage depicting the event in the life of Jesus that occurred there or reflecting on some other event in Jesus' life on which this particular place sheds light. Finally, a brief meditation follows in which I reflect on the meaning of the passage for faith today. And so each chapter utilizes the same sequence: scene, Scripture, story.

My hope is that these stories from the places “where Jesus walked” will be helpful to professors, students, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and laypersons, both those who have been to the Holy Land and those who have not; that is, for pilgrims both real and virtual. For one who is leading a tour to the Holy Land, these descriptions and stories can be used for spiritual reflection and stimulation as you stand with your group on these sites and feel Jesus' power and presence in these places. For those who have not yet been to the Holy Land, perhaps a better insight into the life and ministry of Jesus can be had vicariously as you stand with me in these places where he stood and listen in on echoes of conversations long ago and far away. In either case, it is my fervent hope that through the insights we gain from having walked “where Jesus walked” you will be able to understand a little better why so many of us continue to call this Land “holy.”

Special thanks must be expressed to several persons who assisted me with this project. Randy Frame, of Judson Press, was helpful and encouraging in bringing this project to press. My administrative assistant, Becky Newton, cheerfully assisted me with the myriad details involved in a project such as this. My president and Middle East travel partner, Chris White, offered encouragement and helpful critical insight during the writing. My colleague and friend, Robert Canoy, provided invaluable critical commentary on

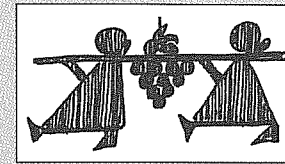
## *Introduction*

the manuscript before it went to press. Finally, in everything I do, my wife, Cheryl, is my most valued colleague and trusted friend. Without her help, I would never do anything very well.

### NOTES

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
2. Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 29.

## Part I



# Galilee



# Nazareth: The Church of the Annunciation

Nazareth was Jesus' hometown. Both Matthew and Luke report that Jesus grew up in Nazareth.<sup>1</sup> According to Matthew, Joseph returned to Nazareth following the flight to Egypt rather than settling in Judea, where Jesus was born, because Archelaus, who ruled Judea when his father, Herod the Great, died in 4 BCE,

proved to be just as unpredictable as his murderous father had been, making Judea unsafe for Joseph and his family (Matthew 2:22). Moreover, Herod the Great's other son, Herod Antipas, who had become ruler of Galilee upon his father's death, had just made Sepphoris, a city about four miles from Nazareth and situated on the Roman road to Jerusalem, his capital and was recruiting stone masons, artisans, and carpenters for its construction. Hence, Joseph, a carpenter who could support his family by working in nearby Sepphoris, settled his family in Nazareth in the relative safety of the Galilee.

But why Nazareth? Why not just live in Sepphoris, closer to his work? Typically, Matthew's answer is to quote the Scripture: "so that the word spoken through the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene,' might be fulfilled" (2:23). But there's more here than just a proof text. The reference is to Isaiah 11:1, "A rod will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a shoot [*netzer*] will bear fruit." The word *netzer*, from which the name Nazareth derives, means "shoot" of Jesse, or descendant of David. The entire village of Nazareth was comprised of returnees from the Exile who were descendants (*netzerim*) of David; that is, Nazarenes. And so Joseph, himself a *netzer*, made Nazareth his home. And Jesus, though he was born in Bethlehem, would call Nazareth his "hometown."

The Nazareth of today is a bustling Arab city of over sixty thousand inhabitants, the majority of whom are Muslim or Christian. Nestled in the hills of Galilee some 1,230 feet above sea level and overlooking the Jezreel Valley, the

Nazareth of today bears little resemblance to the village that was the home of the Davidic clan of Jesus' day. The Nazareth of Jesus' day probably had fewer than two hundred residents, most of whom were members of Jesus' extended family ("kinfolk," *syngeneis*, as Mark 6:4 calls them). Ascending to Nazareth from the Jezreel Valley, you pass on your right the Mount of Precipitation, which, according to tradition, was the place from which Jesus' kinfolk, angry at the implications of his first sermon there in the Nazareth synagogue, tried to throw him to his death.<sup>2</sup>

Modern Nazareth is dominated by the Church of the Annunciation, situated in the heart of the city and visible from almost anywhere. Dedicated in 1968, the church was constructed over the ancient site of a pre-Byzantine Jewish-Christian synagogue, some of which can still be seen in the lower church beneath the contemporary structure. From 1955 to 1960, the Franciscans excavated the site, revealing a series of grottoes, silos, cisterns, mosaic floors, graffiti, and *mikvaot* (Jewish ritual baths). The archaeological discoveries are not from the time of Jesus, but they do give evidence of an early Jewish-Christian veneration of the site, suggesting that from as early as the second century this place was commemorated as the place "where Jesus grew up." It is almost certainly the place visited by the anonymous Christian known as the Pilgrim of Piacenza (570 CE), who wrote of the site, "We traveled on to the city of Nazareth, where many miracles take place. In the synagogue there is kept the book in which the Lord wrote his ABC's, and in this synagogue is the bench on which he sat with the other children."<sup>3</sup> The church now fully covers what was once the entire village complex of Nazareth in Jesus' day, including the synagogue that served as Jesus' elementary school and "home church." It was, no doubt, a place that brought him much joy—and great grief.

*The Scripture: Luke 4:16-30*

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and he entered according to his custom on the sabbath day into the synagogue and stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and he unrolled the scroll and found the place where it stands written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
in behalf of which he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me  
to proclaim release to captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to send forth the traumatized in release,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And having rolled up the scroll and having given it back to the attendant, he sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were transfixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

And all were bearing witness to him and were amazed at the words of grace that proceeded from his mouth, and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

And he said to them, "Truly you will speak to me this parable, 'Physician, heal yourself; as many things as we have heard have happened in Capernaum do also here in your hometown.'"

And he said, "Amen, I say to you: No prophet is favorably received in his hometown. And for a truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up for three years and six months, as there was a great famine over all the land. And to not even one of them was Elijah sent except Zarephath of Sidon, to the widow woman. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and not one of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

And they were all filled with rage in the synagogue hearing these things, and having arisen, they cast him out of the city and led him to the precipice upon which their city was built so that they might throw him down to his death. But passing through the middle of them, he kept right on going on his way.

*"The Sermon"*

First sermons are nerve-racking affairs for everyone involved. I remember my first sermon. I was sixteen years old when I felt "the call" and "surrendered" to the ministry, as we used to describe it in rural Baptist life. That word "surrender" was a pretty heavy term in those days. Typically, it was accompanied with heart-wrenching, down-and-dirty stories of the minister fleeing from God, only to be hunted down by God's call, ultimately leading to the minister's "surrender" to the ministry. Hearing those stories, and not having had any personal "far country" experience upon which to draw, I remember feeling slightly embarrassed that I had not put up more of a struggle.

But once I had gone public, it was inevitable that sooner or later I would have to preach my first sermon. They don't call you "preacher" in Baptist life for nothing.

Well, the dreaded day dawned. My pastor asked me to preach on a Sunday night. I worked for weeks on that sermon. My subject was a modest one: "God, Mankind, the Universe, and Other Related Subjects." I had practiced my sermon in front of the mirror. Somebody told me I should do that. Unfortunately, the person who told me that wasn't a preacher, and my practiced mannerisms showed. My gestures were hopelessly artificial.

"Now I have three [holding up three fingers] things I want to say tonight about God. The first is, God is Big." Dramatic pause for effect. I had seen that done before.

"The second is, God is Good."

“The third is, God is the Ontological Ground of Our Being with Whom We Must Existentially Interact.” I had found a book in the library.

Needless to say, that night was not one of the high points of my preaching career. Indeed, when I got to the seminary, very first class, the professor began to call the roll: “John Archer, William Barber, Charles Crane, Frank Sanders, Wayne Stacy,” and then he paused, looked down over his glasses, and said, “Heard about your sermon, Stacy.” It was a painful memory.

But no matter how difficult an experience my first sermon was, it pales in comparison to Jesus’. At least my audience didn’t try to take me out and stone me to death, no matter how richly I may have deserved it.

What really happened that day in Nazareth? What turned those good, churchgoing folk into a lynch mob?

As Luke describes it, that Sabbath service started out typically enough. Jesus, the hometown “preacher boy” who had made good, returned to his “home church” to worship. Being a guest “preacher,” rabbi, he was invited, as was the custom, to come to the lectern and read the *haftarah*, the prophetic passage for the day. The text was from Isaiah 61, a well-known passage that heralded the hope that one day Israel, on the far side of the Exile, would once again experience God’s blessing and favor. When he finished reading, he gave the scroll back to the attendant and, after the fashion of Jewish rabbis, sat down to preach the sermon on the text he’d just read. Luke reports that the congregation’s initial response to Jesus’ words was positive, but soon began to sour (Luke 4:22–23). Then, although he does not give us the entire sermon Jesus preached that day, he supplies for us two of the stories, sermon illustrations, Jesus told.

It’s fairly safe to say that the sermon was not a “hit.” They dragged Jesus out to the precipice of the hill on which Nazareth sat to throw him down to be stoned to

death. What happened between “and they all spoke well of him and marveled at the words of grace that came from his mouth” and “they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him away to be stoned”?

The sermon happened! Luke doesn’t want us to miss it. He rivets our attention to the sermon: “and all eyes in the synagogue were transfixed on him.”

Now, we know why. Thanks to the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now know that this passage, Isaiah 61, was the favorite text of Jews in first-century occupied Palestine, because it spoke about a great reversal of fortunes: God would restore Israel to its former glory and visit judgment and destruction upon Israel’s oppressors.<sup>4</sup>

No wonder, then, that “they all spoke well of him” when he finished reading the text and announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

“Boy, don’t you just love his preaching! I can’t believe this is his first sermon. We’ve got ourselves a good one here.”

And then the other shoe drops. Jesus tells two stories, the point of both being that God doesn’t divide the world into “friend or foe” as we do. All people, including those we would call enemies, are God’s people. The “good news” that Jesus has come to proclaim is just that—good news, not good news for some and bad news for others.

When the sermon was over, Luke says, the congregation, having gotten the point, became indignant. And they looked at one another and said, “I hate his preaching. Just who does he think he is, coming in here like that and trying to tell us about our God!”

It was the sermon that set them off—make no mistake about it. Jesus, standing in the great prophetic tradition, was doing what prophets always do: reminding them, and us, the “chosen people,” that God is God, and is free to do whatever, with whomever, God pleases, whether that pleases us or not.

And that's so hard to hear, because it's just a short step from saying "I am God's" to saying "God is mine." Once we've experienced God's grace, our human propensity is to become proprietary with it and reserve it only for "our kind." But the gospel, the "good news," is that because God is God and is Father of us all, all kinds are God's kind, and that means that all kinds are "our kind." That is good news, isn't it?

That's what happened that day in the synagogue there at Nazareth, when a bunch of good, churchgoing folk turned into a lynch mob and tried to stone one of their own kinfolk to death. But the gospel has that kind of power over people—to terrorize or to transform. I know, you see, because as I sat there that day in the synagogue listening to the sermon, I looked down, and there in my hand was a stone.

### *For Further Discussion*

1. What is the significance of the fact that early Christians called Jesus a "Nazarene"?
2. Why does Luke say that most of the people who heard Jesus the day he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth were his "kinfolk"?
3. What was the significance of the text Jesus read from Isaiah to first-century Jews?
4. What was there about Jesus' sermon that made the Jewish synagogue worshipers indignant?
5. Do you find it significant that the very first threat to Jesus' life came not from the Romans (pagans) but from his own hometown synagogue, populated, as the New Testament says, "with his own kin"?
6. In your judgment, from where does the greatest threat to the gospel come today?

### NOTES

1. Matthew and Luke disagree over whether Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth prior to Jesus' birth. Luke says that they did (2:4–5), while Matthew implies that they didn't (2:23). The story of the annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Mary informing her that she would bear the Christ is Lukan (1:26–38), hence, the traditions about the place of the annunciation gathered around Nazareth rather than Judea. For a fuller treatment of this issue, see Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992), 13–24.

2. In the first century, you stoned someone in one of two ways. Either you threw stones at the person, or you threw the person at the stones. The people of Nazareth were attempting to stone Jesus by employing the second method.

3. Cited in Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 310.

4. See James A. Sanders, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, vol. 1, *New Testament*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 75–106.