

It's been almost 20 years now, but I still vividly remember preaching my first sermon. It was during my second year of seminary and I had gone home to Ohio for Christmas break. The pastor at the congregation I grew up in had asked if I was willing and able to preach one of the Sundays that I was home.

And I happily agreed. But deep down inside, I was terrified. I had never preached a sermon from a pulpit before. I had written a couple. Presented them to professors and classmates for critique. But that was different.

I was working without a net here. If I messed something up, it wasn't for some meaningless class, where mistakes were both common and expected. It was for a real congregation full of real people accustomed to hearing a real pastor preach a real sermon. And I really did not feel up to the challenge.

Of course, it all went just fine. The congregation was warm and loving and forgiving. I was so intimidated by them, but they had nothing but respect and admiration for me. I was their little Joshua all grown up. They weren't going to use it as an opportunity for criticism. They were proud to hear me preach, even if it was a little rough around the edges.

Today, we see Jesus going back to his hometown of Nazareth to preach his first sermon there. We don't know exactly how long Jesus has been gone, but it's still early in his ministry and the people there still recognize him as Joseph's son. So probably not long.

But even in those few weeks, Jesus has gained a reputation. He's been teaching and performing miracles throughout Galilee. He's becoming a bit of a celebrity.

And I can totally relate to the reaction of the crowd when he comes home. He is their little Jesus all grown up. And he's actually quite the hometown hero.

The son of an ordinary Joe, quite literally, who's become one of the most respected rabbis in the region. Some are even calling him a prophet like John the Baptist. And now he's here! He's back home. He's going to preach in their synagogue.

And everybody is excited. They are proud of him. They are proud of his ministry. And they are proud to have been a part of his life.

It starts off well enough. Jesus stands up and every eye in the crowd turns toward him in expectation. Jesus pulls out the prophet Isaiah, the most prominent, well-known prophet of the scriptures. He quotes an amazing passage, promising good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners, healing to the blind, and relief to the oppressed.

And then Jesus tells them that this is not just some event in the distant past or the distant future. It is being fulfilled, right here, right now. Because, like Isaiah, he too is indeed a prophet. An even greater prophet. He is proclaiming the Word of God. And he is doing all these miracles that Isaiah promised. Restoring sight to the blind and freedom to those oppressed by the devil.

And he has the Spirit of the Lord on him. Visibly poured out on him at his baptism. Which means he is the Messiah. The Christ. The chosen one of God. Come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And suddenly all this enthusiasm... turns to shock. Because Jesus has just gone way too far. Put yourself in their shoes. Imagine if a young man from Boonville grew up, went to seminary, became a pastor, and then came back here. Came back to this very congregation, stood in this very pulpit, and proclaimed to all of you: "I am the Messiah!"

Your reaction would probably be a lot like theirs. OK, maybe not exactly like theirs. Because theirs is tempered a bit. They've heard about Jesus' ministry thus far. They've heard about the amazing events surrounding his baptism. They've heard about the amazing miracles he performed down the road in Capernaum.

And they want to believe him. They want to believe that the Messiah could come from their little town. But they just can't get past their own astonishment. Their own doubt and unbelief.

So even though they've already heard the Word of God. Even though they've already heard the testimony of others who have seen his baptism and miracles. Even though they have everything they need to believe. They still want proof. They want their own miracles.

And what Jesus says next doesn't go over very well. Because what he tells them is that proof is for outsiders. Proof is for Gentiles. Proof is not for God's people. Anybody can be convinced with proof. Foreigners, complete strangers to God's Word, can be converted with proof.

Elijah went to a Phoenician woman, a worshipper of Baal, and convinced her of God's power with miracles. Elisha converted the commander of the Assyrian army with miracles. But that's not faith. That's not God's Word at work in the lives of his people. That's magic tricks and sideshows.

And if the Son of God wanted a bunch of groupies to follow him around because he put on a good show, he didn't need to go to Israel at all. He could have gone to any nation on the planet and gotten followers that way. He came to Israel because for 700 years the people he loved had been waiting for the year of the Lord's favor and for Isaiah's prophecy to be fulfilled. They were waiting for God to be faithful to his promises.

And now he was here. The faithful, trustworthy God of Israel, come to earth. One of their own. Preaching in their little synagogue. Proving that God had heard their prayers. That over all these years. Over all this time. He still loved them. And had sent not just a prophet, but his only begotten son to save them from their sins. This was exactly what they had always wanted to hear.

But they wouldn't accept his message. They wouldn't accept it for the same reason that we have trouble accepting it: Faith is hard and doubt is easy.

It's easy to doubt. It's easy to believe in an absent God. It's easy to believe that God is somewhere out there. Doing something or other that doesn't affect me. It's easy to say, "God, you stay in your corner and I'll stay in mine. And I won't get my hopes up and you won't expect anything of me. And we'll both be happier that way."

But that isn't our God. Our God is a God who hears prayer. Who answers prayer. Who loves and intervenes and saves. Who shows up when we least expect it in the most ordinary forms. In Nazareth, God showed up in an ordinary man. An ordinary son of their community.

For us, God shows up in ordinary water poured over our heads. Ordinary bread and wine eaten at this rail. And an ordinary book. Filled with an extraordinary message of God's love for you.

And just as he showed up in an ordinary man from Nazareth 2000 years ago, he shows up in each and every one of us today. As I said last week, we are all ordinary Christians empowered by an extraordinary God. Filled with an extraordinary Spirit leading us to do his divine work.

And that's what makes faith hard. Sometimes, God shows up with miracles and signs and wonders. But, more often, He just shows up in very ordinary ways. He just shows up with His Word. He just shows up in the trustworthy testimony of others proclaiming that the Messiah has come.

And for all that the people of Nazareth didn't get that, there was a time when the Israelites did. There was a time when they returned from decades of exile in a foreign land. When they came back to ruined cities and a demolished temple. When they came back to nothing... except God's Word.

That's what the book of Nehemiah talks about, that we heard in the Old Testament lesson. And you know what the people of Nehemiah's day found? That God's Word is enough.

Because God's Word is where the Holy Spirit works. And where the Holy Spirit works, there is faith. And if you have faith, well... then you can move mountains. You can build God's kingdom. You can be the body of Christ.

You can believe that God really is working right here beside you. Working to strengthen you. And sustain you. And make you the people of faith he has called you to be.

Faith is where we learn that we don't find strength in the miracles of the Lord. We find strength in the joy of the Lord. The joy that God takes in his people. The joy that God takes in forgiving us all our sins through ordinary water and wine and bread and words. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

The people of Nazareth were looking for proof. They were looking for more than God's Word preached to them in a synagogue. They were looking for miracles and signs and wonders. They were looking for evidence so that they could cast aside their sinful disbelief and embrace a God who came to earth for them.

But if they had looked into their own history, they would have seen that there is no greater proof that any man can receive than that which comes from the hearing God's Word. Because that's proof seen with the eyes of faith.

Eyes that see flesh and blood under bread and wine. Eyes that see the Spirit of God in simple water. Eyes that know without a doubt that today Scripture is fulfilled in our hearing. Because in Jesus Christ, God took joy in his people and he became our strength. Amen.