

## Location, Location, Location

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Texts: Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6

We all know the joke right? What are the three most important things to know about real estate? Location, location, location. Location has always been important – and in the ancient world that was perhaps even more important than it is now. After all, now we can bypass location with internet access and TV news reports.

Then, as now, people knew where the centers of power were—we think of Washington, D.C., New York City, London, Moscow, Beijing, Berlin.... In those days it was Rome, and in Judah, Jerusalem. Perhaps Cesarea Maritima where there was a large Roman fortress. But not Galilee, which was kind of the Holy Land equivalent of, oh I don't know, North Dakota? And not only in Galilee, which was kind of out in the sticks ... but the wilderness in Galilee?? And yet....

*In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

God often seems to come to those who don't expect it. When Moses was leading the people through the wilderness, he named a number of elders to help him with leadership, yet while they were having the ceremony to honor the elders, God's spirit came to two men who weren't among the elders—Eldad and Medad were their names, and some people were outraged that these unauthorized men were experiencing God's spirit, but Moses said, "Are you jealous for my sake? If only all the LORD's people were prophets with the LORD's spirit on them!"

When Jesus and the disciples were in Galilee, at one point the disciples came to Jesus and complained that there were people who were casting out demons in Jesus' name, but they weren't with them, so the disciples tried to stop them. Jesus told them to leave the people alone, saying "Whoever isn't against us is for us."

God's power, God's spirit, God's word, God's presence isn't localized. During the ministry of Jesus, some people discounted him because he was from Nazareth.

About a year ago, the long-running public radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion*, was renamed some time after the new host, Chris Thile, had taken over the program. It is now called *Live from Here*, reflecting that the show has no permanent home, but spends many weeks in New York, some weeks in St. Paul, and other weeks in locations around the country. *Live, from Here*. Wherever it is, is here.

One of the names for Jesus in scripture is Immanuel, which means, "God with us." A significant part of the ministry of Jesus was in conveying God's solidarity with us, God's presence with us. And in Jesus, people had a sense for the immediacy of God's presence, God is, indeed, with us. The living God is here. Live, here. And it has been God's intention to always be among us—in the closing verses of Revelation, the proclamation is "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Live from here. God has been, is, and will be with us.

So what about John? John who baptized, in the wilderness. John who stirred the pot ahead of the coming of Jesus—raising awareness, creating a sense of anticipation. But... in the wilderness? In the wilderness of Galilee? Even further out than Jesus?

I was a delegate to the annual meeting of the Wisconsin Council of Churches last Tuesday. And the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III was one of the speakers there—he is a preacher with a national reputation, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago where Barack and Michelle Obama were members before moving to Washington. And he was there speaking with a young woman, a 17-year-old woman named Tatiana, who had helped to start an organization in Milwaukee called 50 Miles More, which is part of the national youth movement for gun safety. And because of her work with 50 Miles More, she has made friends with some of the youth from Parkland, Florida, and she is part of the national conversation about gun safety. Rev. Dr. Moss reminded us, who might sometimes wonder if anyone is listening to what we are saying in Milwaukee, or Sun Prairie where we were meeting, or Stevens Point, "Your proclamation may be bigger than your location!"

Our location, where Church Street meets Main Street, is one of the great gifts of our congregation. Where Church Street meets Main Street—where faith meets life—where the rubber hits the road as far as our living out the love of Jesus Christ is concerned. We have a beautiful and welcoming building right downtown in Stevens Point, and this building is becoming a way of our doing ministry in partnership with others. We are in

the second season of welcoming the Warming Shelter here—and more people are gaining shelter here this year than last year so far. People who had nowhere to go are sleeping in safety and warmth here.

Last Tuesday, a group of young adults who are involved in organic farming used our building to offer a meal to people “who are hungry for food or community”. As they advertised the meal, they even suggested that people bring containers for leftovers. They’d like to hold meals like this here every month—the next one will be on New Year’s Day and anyone is welcome. It’s another opportunity for us to partner with people in ministry to the community.

Our building is a wonderful ministry—we house Habitat for Humanity Board meetings; we’ve held concerts here; in the past Narcotics Anonymous has met here. When opiate addiction is one of the major problems in our nation, providing such space is an important ministry. Simply maintaining our building well and sharing it with others is a significant ministry of hospitality. And hospitality is a consistent Biblical value.

Our youth group is another way that Frame practices hospitality—our youth group is a welcoming group that seeks to provide safe space for youth to gather and be together—not all of the kids who come are members; indeed, not all of the kids who come are Christians, but they all know they are welcome, just as they are. And that is a wonderful mission to our community. Among young people, churches aren’t always seen as places of welcome and acceptance. But Frame is.

The Session is considering whether to remodel the kitchen—to install a commercial dishwasher and update the stove, among other things. It will cost money, and it will take time. Once the Session has developed a plan, we will bring it to the congregation and ask for your pledges and contributions. This congregation has always had a commitment to mission, and our building is becoming a mission to the community.

John was preaching in the wilderness of Galilee, and yet in Jerusalem, King Herod was aware of his message, and we know of his message. His proclamation was bigger than his location. Our proclamation *is* our location. Live from here—God’s love in action. The second candle is a candle of peace—our hospitality is a way of declaring peace in the world. Peace to all who come here, peace to all who leave here, God’s peace to you. Amen.

