



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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## Losing the Dream of Nazareth (Mark 6:1–13)

*Sonia E. Waters*

*Dr. Sonia E. Waters is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. She delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel on January 27, 2015, at the opening communion service for the spring semester.*

**I**n the name of the one God: our Mother and Father, Savior and Sanctifier.

Welcome to your spring semester! I don't know how your trip home for the January term was, but for Jesus, it didn't seem to work out exactly as he had planned. Maybe you know how he felt.

The sixth chapter of Mark should have been a homecoming, but it led to a loss instead. And if Jesus is fully human and fully divine, I like to imagine that he must reckon with this loss.

He had some choices to make. And it is significant that he sends out his disciples now, after his failure in Nazareth, even though he had already commissioned them as his "preaching team." But it's only now, several chapters after that commissioning, that Jesus says, "Go out—without signs of security or provision—to be welcomed where they welcome you. If they reject you, shake off the dust as if you were standing on Gentile land." So we assume that Jesus, so newly rejected himself, also had to shake off the dust of Nazareth and give up his home.

In pastoral care we know that every significant loss has a back-story, so maybe we should start at the beginning. In the Gospel of Mark, the first thing Jesus does is to leave Nazareth. He leaves his home to go and be baptized by John. He then hears those wonderful words from above, "you are my Son, you are Beloved." Maybe he would have returned to Nazareth after that. But instead, God kicks him out into the desert to be tempted for forty days: the number that signifies a transition, a change.

After his trip to the desert, he still doesn't go home to Nazareth. Instead, he settles in Capernaum with his disciples in tow. And it's there in the synagogue that Jesus' ministry first begins in earnest. Mark tells us in chapter 1, verse 21, "when the Sabbath came Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach" (NRSV). He teaches as one with authority, and they are amazed. He casts out an unclean spirit, and they are amazed again! The old guys in the synagogue turn to each other and ask, "What is this? A new teaching! And with authority!" And his fame quickly spreads abroad.

This first success in the synagogue ignites his ministry. Jesus can hardly go to Nazareth now, because by the evening, the whole town gathers at his door. By the end of chapter

1, they're coming at him from all directions. Crowds are pressing upon him. Those with diseases are pushing their bodies forward to touch him.

By chapter 3, he appoints the twelve disciples to be his preaching and deliverance team. But he does not send them out immediately. By verse 20, he is back in the house, crowded with people's needs.

And while he has still not returned to Nazareth, by now Nazareth has heard about him. His family wants to seize him, because they think he's crazy. The religious authorities want to discredit him, saying he is possessed. And these responses are brought together in Mark, conflating family and religious loyalties—these two sources of belonging and identity.

His mother and brothers will not even come inside. They try to send someone in to bring him to them. But Jesus refuses. Instead he says to those pressing upon him in the house, "you are my family now, if you do the will of God."

Now, we might think Jesus sounds bold or profound here. But really, this is a ridiculous thing to say. Try it out on your own family. See how well it works. But Jesus doesn't seem to care—or at least Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus feels about it.

Instead, what we see is how the distance between Jesus and his family and the religious establishment is contrasted to the nearness between Jesus and all the sick, demonic, broken people on the outside who come in towards him, who crowd around him, who push to get close to him.

What we see is the growing conflict, the growing choice between his calling to this need and the pressures and expectations of the places he once belonged.

Maybe you know something about these kinds of choices.

Jesus does not let his family seize him, forcibly stop him, arrest his movement forwards. Instead he continues teaching, delivering, and healing with the crowds gathering around him.

So why does he return home in chapter 6? By now Jesus is a rock star. Who needs any other family? This issue should be over now. Why does Jesus go home again? It's not like the Gospel of Mark to belabor a point. In Mark, the end is near—cut your ties. But for some reason we are now at chapter 6, and Jesus decides to go home and try again.

He makes his triumphant return to his hometown, and the story parallels his first success in Capernaum. Again Mark says "When the Sabbath day came, he began to teach in the synagogue" and again many who heard him were amazed at his teaching. The old guys in the synagogue first turn to each other and say, "Where did he get all this? Look at this wisdom. Look at the miracles." And then, surprisingly, they turn against him. "Wait a minute, who do you think you are? We know who you really are. We know your family."

They are offended, scandalized by Jesus. He begins the day in his hometown as the golden child. But by the end, he's just another idiot prophet.

Here again, family and religious loyalties are brought together. These are the places of

belonging. These are the contexts of our identity.

The conflicted separation that began all the way back in chapter 3, today finally breaks the dream that Jesus might belong somewhere. He will still be called Jesus of Nazareth at certain meaningful times in the future: when Peter betrays him; when the angels ask the women at the empty tomb if they are looking for him. But we will know that Nazareth signifies a displacement for Jesus, a loss, where there should have been belonging.

Everyone who is called by God, at some point faces the dream of Nazareth: the dream that we will find belonging and identity. It's partly about having to grieve the fact that our families think we are crazy, that we must negotiate a growing rift of experience between ourselves and those we love from this point onwards.

But the dream of Nazareth also tell us that we will get a triumphant return home someday. It tells us that for all our work we will at least receive admiration and authority. We will become established. We will be embraced by a new church family. We will be crowded out by people longing to take part in our ministries. We will be honored by presbyteries and conferences, publishing companies, and Christian magazines.

Everyone has some version of this dream. (Mine currently has a neon sign above it that says "publish or perish.") Because we are indeed fully human. And we want do well for our Savior. After all, we have the call. And we have those first successes in ministry that confirm our gifts and talents. We are ignited—we are on fire for Jesus.

But then, as our lives enter fully into the turning of this transition, we start encountering the losses. We are worn down by the pressures of so many people who claim power over our identities. We start feeling displaced. Successes don't establish us without that slippage, that risk of rejection at their base.

And over time we feel more pressure to conform. To be admired. To pass. To silence the voice of the Spirit. To be the golden child—not the idiot prophet. To perform. And then comes the point when we've given over our calling into the hands of the old guys in the synagogue, seized still by our desire to belong.

And when that happens we have some choices to make. The growing choice between our calling to the world's needs and the arresting expectations of the places we once belonged. Will our call turn us ever more inward into our own needs? Or will it send us further out?

The parallel between Capernaum and Nazareth sets us up to imagine Jesus' expectations: he would be a success; his authority would be recognized. By chapter 6, he's golden.

But Jesus fails. He is rejected. He loses Nazareth.

Yet by being homeless, by refusing the seizure of belonging, Jesus goes even further abroad. He expands his healing and deliverance outwards. It begins a new phase of Jesus' ministry, as the twelve are called into action. More sick, more demonic, more broken people on the outside meet Jesus. More teaching, more deliverance, more healing for

those who long to touch his saving love. This ministry arises from the center of his loss. So this second rejection also ignites his ministry, sending Jesus and the disciples out ever further into the world.

In pastoral care we know that every significant loss also has a future story. And that future takes the shape of the choices that we make.

We begin here at seminary to face that tension between establishment ideas of success and God's ideas of service. And when we begin to slip on our secure identities, the question is, what will arise from the center of your losses?

If the dream of Nazareth should claim our loyalties, we might forget that today, crowded outside our doors, remain the same sick and broken bodies pushing forward for the healing touch of Jesus. We might forget that today the demonic remains in racialized violence in our streets and rape in our colleges and abuse in our homes. Yes, we still know something today about the longing for deliverance.

We might forget that God does not care if we are golden children, because at the end of the day we are no different than those we are called to serve, all of us a family bound by grace and salvation, bound by the one who taught us that the loss is the ignition to our calling.

So at the end of the day, who do you think you are?

Well I'll tell you. You are the beloved child of a displaced savior. Every square inch of you is broken and precious to the One who met you by the rivers of your baptism and has kicked you around from place to place ever since.

This One did not take away your pain and did not stop you from failing, but is a Savior whose character is to pour out loss and turn it into redemption, a Savior who lost everything on the cross to bring healing to this demonic world.

This is the Savior who calls us—broken as we are—into service. My sisters and brothers, there are enough golden children. In a world of sickness and demonic oppression, violence and heartache, the Church sure could use some idiot prophets.