

There is a cliché that says you can't go home. That seems to fit today's Gospel lesson where Jesus went back to his hometown, disciples in tow, to preach and teach in his hometown synagogue and the astonishment of the people who knew him quickly turned to cynicism and rejection that left Jesus amazed. Which seems to prove the cliché.

Since today is also the 4th of July, the line about Jesus' amazement at how his hometown turned on him reminds me of a movie where the protagonist is also from a small, rural town that unexpectedly turned on him. In the classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, newly appointed senator Jefferson Smith was as surprised to find himself in the Senate as his small hometown Jackson City, Montana was proud to send him. Jeff, marvelously portrayed by actor Jimmy Stewart, was an idealist who believed wholeheartedly in the goodness America was founded on and could quote the founding fathers to the boys he led in a boy scout type organization. His idealism was challenged when after only a few days in our nation's capital, the new senator found himself in the middle of a scandal involving illegal actions and big business influencing public policy for the profit of one man. However, reality slapping him in the face didn't quell Jeff's core belief that America is capable of goodness. With the help of his secretary, they came up with a way for Jeff Smith to use his seat as senator to tell the truth. But the political machine – threatened by Jeff's truth telling - spread propaganda through control of the media and silenced people who spoke on his behalf. After twenty-three long hours of speaking, Jeff Smith was presented with bushel baskets filled with notes and letters from people from his hometown and his state asking him to stop. They didn't believe him. Like Jesus, he was amazed.

At the point in the movie where it looks like the idealist has failed, the opposite happens, and the cynic, the character who had lost hope in the ideals and beliefs in America and had sold out to the political machine, has a change of heart. It's a good movie for the 4th of July because it lifts up the unique opportunities a democracy stands for and can provide, how difficult it is to actually practice and live into, and how when we acknowledge when we have failed to live into those tenants of democracy we can turn around and do better.

Similarly, today's Gospel reading shows us a moment in Jesus' ministry where he wasn't successful, at least in the way success tends to be defined. Jesus had preached to a good size crowd, but most people rejected him. Like Jeff Smith, Jesus' failure seems to be due in part to the cynicism of the time. Cynicism is different from skepticism that questions authority. Cynicism is the belief that people are only motivated by their own selfish self-interest.

In Jesus' time there was a movement of preachers who went about espousing the belief that the world had gone to hell in a handbasket and things were so bad the world was beyond redemption. No matter what anyone did, nothing would ever get better; no one could help others. The solution they preached for this sad situation was to ignore the needs of the world and instead focus on self and doing whatever was necessary to make life better for yourself. After dispensing this belief, the cynical preachers often asked for donations and talked about how they were totally independent and self-reliant and didn't need anyone. They carried their possessions with them in bundles and went from town to town preaching their message of independence and hopelessness.

One of the reasons I suspect this cynical movement influenced Jesus' rejection is because of how he responded to that rejection. He didn't keep talking to people who were obviously not listening. He didn't argue with them. He didn't call them names or question their loyalty. Instead, Jesus turned away from his hometown and changed his method of sharing the good news of hope that the Kingdom of God was near, and people needed to change their lives and live into God's Kingdom values.

He did this by sending his disciples out to preach and heal and cast out evil. In other words, to demonstrate something vastly different from cynicism. That there is hope. And hope is not found in selfishness, it is found in the love of God.

Did you notice how Jesus sent his disciples into the world to do this? With nothing but the clothes on their backs, the shoes on their feet and a walking stick. We need to pay attention to these details because I believe they are significant and point to the entire arch of salvation in the Bible.

If you look up the number of times the term “walking stick” or staff is mentioned in the Bible, you will discover it is mentioned well over fifty times and appears in the Books Genesis through Revelation, from beginning to end. Today’s Gospel echoes that first Passover meal the Israelites ate with their shoes on their feet and walking sticks in their hands, signifying the land of Egypt that had oppressed them as slaves was not their home and God was about to free them and lead them home to the promised land. Perhaps you remember how Aaron threw his walking stick on the ground and it turned into a snake that ate up the Egyptian magician’s snakes as a powerful symbol of his authority coming from God. Or when Moses, whose staff had been transformed from a shepherd’s crook, held up that staff or walking stick as a symbol of his authority as leader coming from God.

Jacob used his walking stick for support, and it is true walking sticks and canes can help make walking less tiring. King David had a walking stick that gave him support and symbolized his authority as king came from God and not from his accomplishments. For the prophet Elijah, his walking stick was used to wave over people as a blessing, not unlike the blessing of walking sticks, canes, and trekking poles we had last week. Ezekiel’s vision included a walking stick used as a measuring stick. Throughout the Old Testament we can find instructions warning those who wield walking sticks they were intended to be tools of support and blessing and to not use them for acts of violence. In fact, there were heavy penalties for beating someone with a walking stick. Even in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, we see walking sticks used once again as measuring devices for a new holy temple.

Jesus sending his disciples out with a walking stick is powerfully symbolic and points to the message of repentance they preach with their words and acts of healing and dismissing evil. The walking stick identifies them as God’s messengers who are preaching that despite the evil in the world, despite the selfishness and greed that tempts people to look away from the needs of others, despite the greed that uses people to benefit self, and the cruel ways we can discriminate and hurt each other, despite the many ways people have turned from God, God still loves the world and everyone in it and is redeeming the world. That is why Jesus came, and why Jesus preached the Kingdom of God had come near through him.

Being sent out without food and money meant the disciples would have to show God’s Kingdom isn’t like a political machine that overpowers and manipulates; instead, it starts small and humble, grows like a seed in the hearts, minds, and homes of people. Being welcomed into other people’s homes meant the disciples needed to practice the other side of hospitality by receiving it. That means they couldn’t control the situation, only be open to how they might show God’s love wherever they were. The disciples were on a mission to liberate people from the hopelessness of cynicism by showing them God’s love present in their lives.

Thousands of years later, the movement of cynicism is far from over. The words of Mark’s Gospel and the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* are both as relevant today as they were when they were written or made. It’s true there is a lot that is wrong in the world, our institutions, communities, governments, schools, and churches. What seems to define what is wrong has a lot to do with an individual’s personal opinions. This can be discouraging and present the temptation to give up caring or reject hope as naive idealism. But that’s why God gives us walking sticks and other symbols of hope that no matter what life throws at us, no matter what choices people make that end up hurting us or our communities, God has not given up, God has not rejected us. God is present, making God’s kingdom at home here.

I am enormously proud of how we adapted our ministries to meet the demands of the pandemic, and the ways we have brought the liberating message of God's love and hope into the homes and hearts of people who hadn't stepped foot in a church in years, maybe never had. Putting sermons, TARDIS Talks, and other messages of hope on our church YouTube channel has had a positive impact on the lives of people. We've received comments from individuals from all walks of life sharing how those messages touched them.

In times like a pandemic, it can be tempting to become cynical because we can't do what we've always done. The desire and drive to get our way can be strong, even if it means leaving others behind. Today's Gospel is a good reminder that it isn't always about us, and there are new ways we can go out into the homes of others. Now our walking sticks aren't just canes, or trekking poles, they are computers and tablets and smart phones. There is a lot we can learn from the ways we've been welcomed into people's hearts and homes. We can take these lessons to heart in how we imagine and plan and continue to adapt our ministries to be God's presence to a neighborhood that is so much larger than we imagined. The cliché might be true that we can't go back home, we can't go back to the past, but Jesus is still calling us to go forward with what tools we have and tell people of God's love. There is still a world in need of hope. And even if it is not easy to imagine what this work and ministry might look like right now, it is still the Holy Spirit work of hope, and it's work I am excited to do with you.