

“Faith in Place?” (7Feb21) Mark1:29-39

You’re probably ready for a vacation, so here’s a little guided tour.

Welcome to the village of Capernaum. I’d start to call it the base of operations for Jesus, but the fact he won’t stay put and wants to keep moving on to other towns probably means he doesn’t want a base of operations (or a capital of the godly empire, if you will).

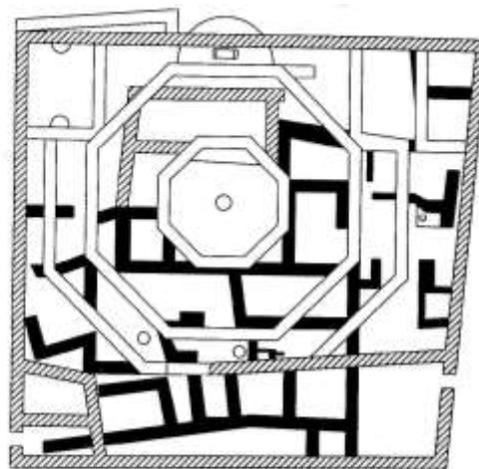


In the time of Jesus, Capernaum had a population of about 1500 people—four times more than Nazareth, and was along a major trade route, but still pretty rural, not a cultural center. Maybe think Kearney, Nebraska, also along a highway.

You might be able to tell that it’s pretty a compact size. All 1500 of those people would fit into the area of our MCC grounds, with little houses side-by-side.

One of those houses is our focal point today, though you can’t see much of it in the ruins because it’s got a church-on-stilts perched over the top of it, the thing behind the palm tree that looks like a spaceship or a James Bond villain’s headquarters. It’s got a glass floor in its center to look down at what’s underneath.

And what’s underneath that 30 year-old stilted structure is a 1500 hundred year-old set of concentric octagons, marking a special location.



ST. PETER'S HOUSE AND CHURCH, FIFTH CENTURY (white), FOURTH CENTURY (hatched), FIRST CENTURY (black) STRATA (AFTER CORBO)

Underneath that is a house church from the 4th Century, which was constructed by clearing some walls and accoutrements from a regular house, which had existed for about 400 years.

And *that's* the location of Peter's house from our Gospel reading, or the house where Peter's mother-in-law was healed. Even if Jesus didn't want to have a homebase, apparently from the very earliest of Christians, they were keeping track of this place, plastering and painting the walls and putting in a tile mosaic floor, making it much fancier than any of the other simple structures in the neighborhood.

On trips, I really like Capernaum, because I can feel the old town, the ruins of the streets and walls, set there alongside the Sea of Galilee where Jesus' friends would fish. To me, it gives more of a picture of the place than celebrated locations like Bethlehem or Jerusalem, with their Churches of the Nativity and the Holy Sepulcher, respectively. (Don't get me wrong, I love those places, in other ways. Just not for feeling like Jesus was there.) A book on biblical archaeology, indeed, says this little spot in Capernaum “actually is one of the very few credible localizations of a New Testament

tradition.”* In other words, you can bet your boots, folks: it happened here.

Still, it’s ironic to have it marked as special, memorialized with newer architecture, set apart as a church. The term “set apart” is a definition of holiness. Jesus wasn’t trying to make it holy or religious. He was hoping for some lunch and a place to rest, going about his business of helping others and healing and restoring relationships. The house where a fisherman’s mother-in-law resided was not a holy place.

Or, I guess we should say, it was not more holy. One of the things we see and understand in Jesus is that nothing is set apart, that there aren’t sacred places versus secular, places with God and places without. Maybe a prime reason Jesus was born in the first place was to have God in our typical existence, in the everyday places, present in our common locales, like rural towns and narrow streets, places where people work or are sick or have slept or eat breakfast.

One sense of that I very much admire comes from Orthodox Epiphany, a festival they celebrate with Jesus’ baptism. In that belief, as Jesus waded into the waters of the Jordan River, his presence reverse “contaminated” all waters, by his contact literally rippling out to make all waters holy water. There is not a drop that’s not been touched and infected by the presence of Jesus and God’s blessing.

So if the holiness isn’t in a special location, if Jesus and his goodness were in a simple house in ancient Capernaum and it was nothing more, then it raises a question of what we think of church, maybe including why we continue to offer these livestream worship services from here in the Blessing Room, if it’s not more holy and shouldn’t really be special, and we shouldn’t have a sense restricting Jesus to an isolated place.

Through these months, Pastor Sonja has been good at reminding us that the church is not closed. Even though this building is awfully quiet, the church is where God is present with you. Which, of course, is everywhere.

So I’ve continued to deliberate that, from the beginning and throughout the weeks. Especially today, I could’ve avoided dragging worship leaders out into the cold and stayed in the comfort of my home as an example, a witness to remind you that Jesus isn’t just here, but is in your own home.

There are a variety of reasons we’ve continued mainly offering worship in this format, and this isn’t the place to go into a list of explanations. But for one thing, we could see this focal point as what spreads out, just like Jesus wading out into baptismal waters. Here, when I splash in a font, you know the baptismal promise of renewal in all your washing. Here, when we are told that God is with you in this place, you carry that belief out to all the other places. Here, when we see God in each other, our eyes are opened to see God in all people, all relationships. Here, when we gather around a table and are told that Jesus is present in our eating and drinking, it may not be a fish sandwich that Peter’s mother-in-law served, but we can extrapolate that to all our meals.

Maybe we don’t look to a family’s 1st Century Capernaum home as holier, but by seeing that place, we remember in one healing that Jesus cares for our bodies and our lives and is working wellness. These days, we certainly benefit from that assurance. If you were here, I’d smear Palestinian olive oil on you, connecting to the place of Jesus. But that’s just to help the reminder.

We are here not primarily to be distracted by special holiness, as if we’ve been sublimely transported elsewhere, but to focus our attention, to recognize Jesus, and then recognize him in the rest of life.

That message informs and forms us. When you say you feel God in the beauty of nature, that’s only because you’ve been formed to expect God might be there. When you say God is working through doctors and nurses to fight the pandemic, it’s because you’ve been led to trust this is how God works. Even when you walk into a majestic cathedral with its inspiring artwork, it doesn’t

* *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, p130

contain God in a building built by human hands, but communicates God into our lives.

Rob Olson, as hymn selector, thought it was odd to sing “All Are Welcome” with its language of “Let us build a house...all are welcome in this place.” But we know church isn’t a club as a safe little shrine, a hideout and refuge where everything is briefly okay from all the rotten stuff outside, but is a way of living that spreads.

So, finally, it’s not about Peter’s mother-in-law’s house, nor about this building here, but about your house, where you exist.

All of that can be summed up in four simple points of movement:

1. an ancient home of daily life in Capernaum...
2. became a focus as a special place now for 2000 years
3. and became some model for this location which we mark off as special
4. all so that you may know that God’s blessings are with you in your home, in your normal daily life, in all existence.