In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text speaks of the astonishment of the hometown folk at Jesus and of their reason for their astonishment: he is a carpenter. And so the people exclaim:

Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary... (Mark 6:2-3, RSV)

His hometown folk seem to have dismissed Jesus—perhaps because he had no university education. What was his college? What was his seminary? What were his credentials? By way of contrast, consider St. Paul. Some people might have disliked Paul but there was no questioning his credentials. He was a Pharisee, a member of a group of men honored for their learning and piety. They could point to Paul’s teacher: Paul had been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), who was a doctor of the law and held in honor by all the people (Acts 5:34). But this Jesus had no similar credentials as far as his neighbors knew.

And yet a man, a woman, can learn much in daily work, including the work of carpentry. And this is something for us to think about. You and I can learn much in day-by-day labor. We can draw closer to God during the years of our vocation. We can become more Christ-like in the course of doing our daily work.

There is a wisdom appropriate to each particular vocation. The people of Nazareth probably did not mind that kind of wisdom in Jesus. Jesus lived in Nazareth for about thirty years before beginning his public ministry. During those years Jesus no doubt acquired the wisdom and skills appropriate for a carpenter. He knew about wood, for example. He knew which wood was hard and which soft, which easy to work with and which difficult. He knew how to negotiate with the wood sellers, and he knew how to carry the load of wood and stack it in his shop. He knew about his tools and how to take care of them and how to be safe with them. He knew about planing and sanding and about joints. He knew about these sorts of things – the sort of things any good carpenter must know. The people of Nazareth did not begrudge Jesus that kind of wisdom. In fact they probably required it of him.

And then some carpenters acquire a second kind of wisdom: They learn about people and how to treat people fairly and with respect. We might well know that in our own lives. There might be shopkeepers or other workers in
our lives whose words we trust. If our barber or our physician, for example, has some opinion about life and about how to treat people, we incline to listen, because we have seen this person in action over the years and we have come to trust that he is a good man, that she is a good woman.

In a small town like Nazareth, it would not due for Jesus to be known as a shabby or dishonest worker. And he was not known in such a low way. In our text the complaint about him is not that he is a dishonest carpenter, but simply that he is a carpenter. The people do not say, “Where did this man get such wisdom? Why, we have known him for years. He is that shabby carpenter who used to work in such and such a shop.” No, that is not the complaint about Jesus. The complaint is not that he was a bad carpenter, or a dishonest businessman, or a grouchy neighbor. They are willing to credit Jesus with being a good carpenter and with that second kind of wisdom that consists in compassion and respect toward others. Rather, the complaint was simply that Jesus manifests a wisdom that goes beyond that of a carpenter and a good neighbor. They do not mind that Jesus has the skills of a carpenter and that he is a decent man. What they cannot fathom is how Jesus can speak in such a spiritual way. “Why, he speaks of Almighty God as a father. Where did Jesus, our long time neighbor, our local carpenter, where did he get such insight?” It does not add up for his neighbors. They knew Jesus when he was a boy. They think that they have some feel for the range of his possibilities. But Jesus preaching like this knocks all their expectations akilter, and they do not like it.

And so the people of Nazareth are puzzled about a third kind of wisdom: knowledge of the Lord. They do not mind that Jesus has the appropriate skills of a carpenter. They do not mind that he has the neighborly wisdom of compassion and respect. What troubles them is that he knows the Lord. In the course of his thirty years, while he was planing the wood, negotiating the price of the project, and chatting with his neighbors… during all those years of growing up and doing ordinary kinds of things, Jesus was also learning of God and drawing closer to him. Jesus, it seems, has been a man of prayer and contemplation and purity. His neighbors might have taken shortcuts, might have engaged in vices of various sorts, might have lost their temper at times and hurt other people, but Jesus had not been doing those sorts of things. Instead Jesus had been becoming a godly man. Now the people of Nazareth see this. He has returned to them with quite a following of disciples, he has spoken in their synagogue, and it is clear that unlike so many of them, he has not been wasting the last thirty years. He has been becoming the man he is from all eternity – the very man about whom on the Mount of Transfiguration, Almighty God was proud to say, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (Mark 9:7).

But these folks in Nazareth do not want to listen to him. And in this, there is a caution for you and me. Let us not stop listening to Jesus. Let us not
become overconfident concerning him. Let not our familiarity with him dull our listening and are learning of him.

Consider two examples – one concerns learning something new about Jesus. That is, renewing our attention to the Bible and to the story of Jesus can reveal something new to us about him, something we had not much thought about before. So that is one kind of example – the case of learning something new about our Lord. The other example concerns remembering something we learned long ago about Jesus and his ways and his teachings, but which we have set aside in our thinking and in our lives. We know that Jesus taught such and such, but we haven’t really thought about it in a good long while, and maybe it is time we should think about it again.

Let’s begin with the first example – a case of looking with fresh eyes at the Bible and the story of Jesus and perhaps learning something new from that story. In our present case, today’s Gospel story about Jesus coming home to Nazareth, for some of us it is a rather new slant on things simply to note that Jesus moves on from Nazareth. He leaves that town behind, and that is a pretty sad thing, if we think about it. Nazareth is his hometown, but he moves on. The Bible puts the matter this way:

5And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them.
6And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching. (Mark 6:5-6, RSV)

It is as if Jesus is a gentleman who will not stay where he is not wanted. But let us want him! Let us not be the ones who so weary of Jesus and dismiss him that he moves on to some other people, leaving us behind. Maybe he will have more success with those other people, God bless them, but, my! It is a sad and worrisome thing to think that Jesus might just respect our wishes and get out of our way. There is such a thing as a hardening of the heart. Let it not come upon us! Jesus, of course, always stands ready to receive us again if we should turn toward him. But the people of Nazareth did not turn toward him and so he moved on. Maybe it is time for us to ask the question, are we turning again toward Jesus? He moves on to other villages and other people, leaving us in peace. But is this the kind of peace we really want? Do we want our hearts to be untroubled by Jesus, unchallenged by Jesus?

This past Thursday was my birthday. I turned sixty-seven. For sixty-seven years I have been in church. For sixty-seven years, even when I was a child and could only understand the story of Jesus in a childlike way, still for sixty-seven years Jesus has been visiting my village. Do I want him to leave me behind and move on? Do I want to treat him as the people of Nazareth treated him long ago, so that he simply moves on. He does not call down fire from heaven upon that town, but he moves on. And in moving on, he leaves that
town poorer. To any degree in which I permit my love for Jesus to cool, I thereby make myself poorer. Let us not do that. Let us learn from today’s Gospel story that we do not want to harden our hearts toward Jesus, so that it is, for all practical purposes, as if Jesus no longer dwells with us, nor we with him.

That, then, is an example of something new we might have learned this morning about Jesus. He moves on. If we are not careful he would leave us in peace, but is that the kind of peace we really want?

Now let me conclude by speaking of the second kind of example – the kind of familiarity with Jesus that tempts us to forget some of his fundamental teachings. We are not talking about new insights to Jesus. Rather we are talking about old, old themes that we might have forgotten. Jesus comes into our village and preaches to us the things on his heart, but our eyes rather glaze over and we think to ourselves, “I have heard this all before, and I do not need to think about it much anymore.”

The particular theme I am worrying about is the notion of a final accounting for our lives. Even the very words we speak are going to be the subject of examination in eternity. And so Jesus says:

I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; (Matthew 12:36, NRSV)

St. Paul expresses the matter most simply:

For [God] will render to every man according to his works [according to her works]: (Romans 2:6, RSV)

But we do not need the Apostle to state the principle for us. We find it everywhere in the preaching of Jesus. Early on in this Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus speaks of having to give an account for our anger:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment... (Matthew 5:21-22, NRSV)

And if there be no final accounting for ourselves, there is no point to such a fundamental teaching of Jesus as this:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and
steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Matthew 6:19-20, RSV)

Again, if there is no final reckoning, then there is no such thing as laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven. But then, it is hard to make sense of Jesus. He lived with an eye on heaven. He lived wanting to please his heavenly Father, “who art in heaven.”

I fear that many people in our land have forgotten or perhaps were never told that in the end we are going to have to give an account of our lives to our Maker. And if we do not believe that, or we have never been told it, then all kinds of violence and suicide and chaos become possible. People have stood right on the precipice of disaster and at the last moment have been saved by thinking of God. I do believe this. They stood on the edge, peering downwards into violence or sin. They have stood there, dizzy at the depths to which they could plunge, and thanks be to God, they have turned away simply because they remembered again the old, old teaching that someday we must give an account of our lives to our God.

Let not our familiarity with Jesus dull our hearts to his ways and his teachings. Let us not so ignore and dismiss Jesus in our lives that he might as well move on to some other village. Instead let us turn toward Jesus with increasing earnestness, and God willing, he will do some wonders in our village and in our lives. To him be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.