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Epiphany III  
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St James Episcopal Church

High school and college reunions seem like joyous things and I figure some disbelief creeps in, too. One of the scandals at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the class of 1969 from Granger High School in West Valley City, Utah was the news that Jeff had a son who is forty-two. If you do the math, this means Jeff became a father while he was a junior in high school, a fact that was missed by everyone, so it seems. I didn't go to the reunion, but I sure heard about this story.

Imagine that, Jeff having a kid before we all graduated. It was enough that one of my girlfriends was married in her senior year because she WANTED to, not because she had to, and both sets of parents consented. So I was a bridesmaid for a seventeen-year old classmate prior to high school graduation. That was a bit of an odd thing, that one of the people sitting next to you in class was already married.

At that reunion, other things surfaced, I guess. People were not surprised by how some lives turned out. On the other hand, there were a few shocking moments based on how people had turned out or what they did for a living. Of course, nothing beats the shock of the clothing, hairstyles and wrinkles of a bunch of folks in their mid-50s who haven't seen each other in 30+ years.

And there's nothing like the remembering of people who have known you the longest. Old friends and family can be pretty funny when you are dating and they gather to see who has come calling! I knew you when, and pictures of bare bottoms and cute grins on fuzzy rugs, diaper changing

pictures, on your first bicycle, your first trip to the barber, the dog licking your ice cream, whatever it is, it can be embarrassing.

Jesus has returned to his hometown. To see and hear him, the son of a carpenter preaching in the gathered community and later labeled the Messiah, a stretch for some of them; maybe for all of them.

It brings to mind an event in my own history. I went home to my home congregation, a Lutheran parish in the south end of Salt Lake City, while I was in seminary. Cocky and a little too full of myself, they probably wondered why I had left for seminary in the first place. I wonder if they had second thoughts about sponsoring me and raising me up to ordained ministry.

At least two kinds of men sat in the assembly that day as Jesus read those words from the scroll. One group would be skeptics, scorning Jesus' reading and Jesus' commentary on the reading. Another group would be curious and eager to hear what Jesus had to say for himself. I'm sure there are other shades of response to the power of his statements.

A newcomer to the group would have a different reaction than that of a man who could say, "Oh, I knew him when...."

So it is that a stranger might have more impact in a group than a long-attending member. Sometimes we don't hear or see new things in each other if we've been together for a long, long time. We learn to accommodate for a strength or a weakness. We know which subjects are hot buttons with each other and either choose to avoid the buttons or take joy in punching them with regularity.

Strangers bring a new opportunity to tell old stories to a new audience. Strangers have a new batch of stories to tell, ones we haven't heard before, new thoughts and new things to contemplate.

This congregation contains both groups. We have people who have been attending this parish for a way long time. Some people have attended for less than five years or maybe fewer years than five.

This is a home town for many people. Being here is being part of a family. We have the dynamics of a family, too. We can nip at each other's heels like playful puppies. We can hurt and injure and wound one another, too. For those who have been around for a long time, this is not the place to stop growing, to settle in and take it easy. Christian faith and life isn't about sitting down and sipping lemonade. There are ideas and stories and shared experiences that push us to understand ourselves, each other and our God a little more clearly. And some of these nudges of the Spirit are filled with hard thinking, self-reflection and changed behaviors.

New folks can wonder if they have a voice. Can they take their place here? How long do I have to be here to be included? What does it mean to be welcoming? When they talk about St. James, are they including me?

We know from stories in the Gospels that the welcome wasn't always a warm one for Jesus. The Romans seemed pretty neutral, but the Pharisees, Sadducees and the High Council weren't thrilled with Jesus' approach to the law and the faithful living of life.

I hope that this congregation doesn't slip into Old Town/New Town with the railroad tracks running through the middle. We are part of the family of God and the Body of Christ. For God the passing of our years is like a second. There is no partiality on God's part, based on seniority.

May God give us the graciousness and the grace to see the face of Jesus in one another, Jesus our hometown carpenter's son who has brought the good news to those of us who are poor, blind, imprisoned or enslaved.