

“Hometown Boy”

Luke 4:14-21, 29-30

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Jesse Carson was coming home! Coming home to coach! Jesse had been gone a while. He'd been a star quarterback at T.C.U. Then he'd had a promising start coaching the Bobcats out west in Comfort. Jesse's Bobcats won a semifinal spot last year in Division 2A!

Jesse was coming home. This was big news, really big news. Big news for Jesse, moving up to a 3A school, and big news for the Crimson and Black, who hadn't made it past the opening round in last year's playoffs.

A series of events was planned. The mayor was going to weigh in, so was the District Superintendent. A big homecoming parade was planned down Main Street. Lots of Mexia's 3,000 residents would be showing up for that.

People had high hopes. The old timers remembered Ray Rhodes, star Wildcat way back in 1968. Ray had gone on to play pro, but it was as a coach he really shone. Five Superbowl rings with the 49ers. Ray was still shining out in Houston. Course, hopes for Jesse weren't *that* big, but even so, people were proud to welcome their hometown boy back. They'd heard what miracles he'd done with the team in Comfort, how under him those young men had become all but invincible. Said it couldn't be done. Somehow, Jesse found the power to do it.

Well the day was finally here. A big parade, culminating in a stirring speech from Mexia High's new head football coach, Jesse Carson. All the old men were there, hanging on his every word. All the young men, too, and their girlfriends, their mothers, and their grandmothers. Anybody who was anybody was there to listen.

Jesse stood stage center. All eyes were on him. He looked so young! But strong, too, powerful in the way they needed him to be. That morning as the sun shone so brightly down on the town square, Jesse chose to talk from the old playbook. He read from the wisdom of those who had gone before him.

Good! The old men leaned back on their heels, poked another chaw in their cheeks, settled in for the familiar. Good. They talked among themselves.

“I knew old Jesse would do the job.”

“Well, we all figured he'd listen to his elders; he knows what's good for him.”

They mentioned the Board of Education insiders who'd lured him here. They knew he'd stick with the tried-and-true.

They couldn't wait for him to announce his own strategy, to interpret the old playbook his own particular way, to put his seal, his stamp on it. Now was his time, and he took it. They couldn't wait for him to announce his starting team. They pretty much knew ahead of time who was going to be chosen: their sons and nephews, sons of their friends.

All eyes were on Jesse. Jesse began to speak. Jesse quoted the book, and then he put it down. He spoke to them eye-to-eye. No paper between them.

"Today is a big day for the Mexia Cats. Today is a big day for me. I have been gone several years. I left, wet behind the ears, just 18 and headed for college. I had a great college career. Things came pretty easily to me. I was lucky. I didn't get hurt. I had great coaches. I had a lot of support. They kept after me about my grades, so I earned a degree, too. I had a chance I would have never had if I hadn't been given a football scholarship."

"I was sent here to make a winning team out of a bunch of boys. I aim to do a lot more than that. After college I learned some life lessons that I will never forget. This playing field is not an even one. There are so many talented guys who never even get a stab at what I had. Not because they can't play ball, not because they're not smart, but because of the color of their skin, or because of their accent, or because nobody in their family had ever even thought of going to college."

"I am here to announce, all that is ending. You see, I came here, not just to coach, but to mold young men. All young men. Black and white, Hispanic and Anglo, those born in Mexia and those from God-knows-where. We have got to do more than teach these kids to punt, pass, and catch. We must do more than build them up to block and tackle. I am here to level the playing field, to create a team that isn't just a bunch of insiders. And I am here to win! We have some awful history to overcome, here in Mexia. We do not want to be known as the town that drowned three black teenagers ANYMORE. We want our story to be different. The place to do it is here, the time to do it is now!"

Jesse picked up his papers, walked off the platform, and left the crowd in stunned silence.

The whispers started, "Who does he think he is?" "What's gotten into him?" "He's not gonna get away with this, he's gone off the deep end already and the season hasn't even started!"

What the crowd didn't know was four years ago Jesse had a personal encounter with another Jesse, one from long ago. One who had picked up a scroll and had shocked his hometown crowd. One who was ridden out of town on a rail. Jesse's coaching changed. His focus changed. His **life** changed. Jesse would never be the same again, and neither would Mexia.

That other Jesse, his mother called Yeshua, many called Jesus. That Jesus came, upsetting the status quo. That Jesus came, derailing business as usual. That Jesus came, to bring good news to the poor (even us)

Us who are so poor we think a full bank account makes for a full life

Us who are so poor we fill ourselves with things that cannot nourish

Us who are so poor we think winning is everything.

That Jesse came to release the captives (even us)

Us who are captive to our prejudices and blind spots

Us who are captive to “shoulds” and “oughts” and “must haves”

Us who are captive to worries about our future.

That Yeshua came to give recovery to the blind (even us)

Us who are blind to the beauty all around us

Us who are blind to seeing good in others

Us who are blind to the need crying out all around us

Jesus came, crying freedom for the oppressed (even us)

Us who are oppressed by materialism and greed

Us who are oppressed by our own righteousness

Us who are oppressed by our inability to forgive

In Him, the Hometown Boy, Jesse, Yeshua, Jesus, this scripture has been fulfilled. Today is the day. Now is the time. God gives us no other day than today to bring good news, release captives, free the oppressed, give new beginnings to those with no hope.

Now is the time. To reach beyond the poverty of our own thoughts and take hold of the depth of the riches Christ offers all of us. This is the day to act, to listen to someone who may need it just **now**. To look into strangers eyes and really see them as fellow human beings. Today is the day, to contribute prayers and money for Haiti relief, to cry out injustice when we see it. When we see it in our workplace, in our school, in our neighborhood, our town, our government.

Today is the day to say that when a city of a million people falls in a rubble and 200,000 may be dead, this is not just a natural disaster, this is injustice. By

comparison, the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco, a city of similar size and an earthquake of the same magnitude, resulted in only 63 deaths.

Today is the day, to be amazed at what God is doing to upset the status quo.

Jesse Carson? Under his watch, twelve down-and-out young men won football scholarships and went on to college. Jesse lasted only three years as head coach. They rode him out of town on a rail.