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Jesus the Sailor
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There are several locations Christians immediately associate with the life of Jesus. There is Bethlehem, in Judea, where Jesus was born; Nazareth, in Galilee, where he grew up; and Jerusalem, where he was crucified. These are the places where Jesus began and ended his life. But the places where Jesus carried out his ministry are less familiar.

The most frequently mentioned and most memorable town is Capernaum. Jesus seems to have made his ministry's headquarters there, at the home of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Not only does Jesus return again and again, but when the gospels of Mark and Luke say Jesus "returned to his hometown," they usually mean Capernaum rather than Nazareth.

So it should not be surprising that many of the other named locations of his ministry are near Capernaum, such as Gennesar, Chorazin, Bethsaida and Gergesa. These are the most frequently mentioned places in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and most of Jesus' ministry takes place in and around them.

These towns bring out another observation about Jesus' ministry. It took place around the Sea of Galilee. Several other events, such as Jesus driving out demons or preaching to large crowds, take place at unnamed locations "in the wilderness" on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. At another point Jesus takes a trip into the "cities of the Decapolis," a region on the sea's southeast shore.

All this points to a single conclusion. For most of his ministry, Jesus based himself on the Sea of Galilee and used it as a means of transportation. This shows that Jesus took advantage of the fastest mode of transportation in the ancient world, the sailboat. Neither walking nor riding on donkeys or camels could match the speed or the comfort of moving about on the water. By sailing, Jesus could cover the most "ground" in the least amount of time.

While the Sea of Galilee was a good transportation choice for Jesus' activities, it raises the question, what was he doing so far from home? In the ancient world, few people ever traveled more than a day's walk, about 15 miles, from the place where they were born. After all, their entire family, the family land, plus their livelihood and responsibilities all were right there. To leave familial territory was to cut off contact with one's family, for there were no means of communication. Few people could read or write a letter, but even if they could, there was no postal service. And of course the telephone and e-mail were millennia in the future. So what was Jesus doing a two-day journey, some 30 miles by road, away from his home in Nazareth?

Most of the gospels ignore this question, but Luke addresses it head-on. In Luke's story, Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness after he was baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus then returned to Nazareth, where in the synagogue, he claimed to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of being God's chosen messenger. The villagers saw this bold claim as blasphemy and they attempted to carry the appropriate punishment for this sin, death. They could see him only as Joseph's son, who had grown up among them, rather than as a prophet. Jesus escaped from them and left the area. According to Luke, Jesus then proceeded directly to Capernaum to begin his ministry around the Sea of Galilee.

So Jesus picked the best location in Galilee for his ministry, the transportation center of the Sea of Galilee. In doing so he left his home region behind. But he was pushed out by the inability of those with whom he had grown up to grasp his new role.