

A Jesus Style Jubilee

Luke 4:16-30

Though not quite the same experiences—just as everyone remembers their first kiss, so preachers remember their first sermons. And in both cases, it’s usually a bittersweet memory—the feeling electric; the technique . . . a little sloppy.

As I recall, I preached my first sermon in my home church at age 15. We start ‘em young in Texas. (Come to think of it, I preached my first sermon before I had my first kiss—which is kind of pathetic, actually). The message itself, in hindsight, was very sloppy: too rambling, too superficial, too disjointed, too long—a lot of sound and fury, but not much substance and focus.

By professional homiletic standards, my first sermon was pretty poor . . . D-plus at best. But I didn’t know that at the time. And neither did the congregation—or if they did (and I’m sure some of them did)—they never let on to me. After the service, they all came by, shook my hand, and offered the most gracious comments. The next Billy Graham? Could be . . . right here from our own church family. God bless loving, supportive home churches.

The response to Jesus’ first sermon in Luke’s Gospel, however, delivered in his home synagogue in Nazareth, didn’t turn out so well.

Jesus began his public ministry at 30 years of age—twice as old as I was (makes you stop and think). As was his custom, he comes to the local synagogue on the Sabbath, only this day it’s his turn to read the Scripture lesson and provide commentary.

Matthew and Mark report a similar episode, but Luke greatly expands upon it and sets it as the opening act of Jesus’ mission. It’s thus a primary, programmatic scene for Luke, painted with vivid detail. Notice the “order of service”:

- Jesus stands up from the congregation.
- The synagogue attendant hands him a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, doubtless the only copy in town (no personal scrolls or pew scrolls).
- Jesus unrolls this treasured scroll and locates the day’s text—a combination of Isa 58:6 and 61:1-2 in our reference system.
- He then reads aloud. Here I’d love more detail: I’d love to know the pitch, volume, cadence, and inflection he used, but Luke doesn’t give us that, and we have no recording.
- After reading, Jesus re-rolls the scroll and returns it to the attendant.

- Then he sits down, not because he's through, but because this was the customary posture of teaching (unlike our standing behind a lectern).
- The drama intensifies, as “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” Everyone's filled with anticipation, locked in, tuned in to what Jesus is going to say about this text.

I want to hold this tension awhile longer, however, and go straight to the *response* Jesus receives. Then we'll circle back to the *content* of his message.

Initially we learn that “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth,” while buzzing to one another—“Is not this Joseph's son?”

Though such responses may seem favorable, they are not altogether clear-cut. The Greek term rendered “spoke well of” can also simply mean: “*bore witness to.*” “All bore witness to him”—that is, they heard his sermon, began to talk about and evaluate it, but not necessarily approve of it.

As far as being “amazed” at Jesus' words, that can cut two ways:

- (1) **EITHER** Wow! We've never heard anything like that before: that's wonderful and exciting
- (2) **OR** Whoa! *We've never heard anything like THAT before:* that's strange and disturbing.

“Is not this Joseph's son?” That can also cut two ways:

- (1) **EITHER** Wow! How about that Joseph's boy; isn't he something? Chip off the old block, Nazareth's favorite son. We're so proud
- (2) **OR** Whoa! This is Joseph's kid, for goodness' sake, a local laborer like the rest of us. Where does he get off with all these high-falutin' claims? Who does he think he is? He's gettin' above his raisin'.

Is it “Wow” or “Whoa”? *Probably a bit of both.* The stunned congregation doesn't quite know what to make of this “new” Jesus of Nazareth, this son of Joseph.

Of course, we're more clued in as readers of Luke's story. The opening chapters disclose that in fact Jesus is *not exactly* Joseph's boy, but rather God's Son in human flesh, conceived by God's Spirit in Mary's womb. But we don't know who all knows this *within* the Nazareth community, except Mary and Joseph—and even they don't grasp the whole picture. Mary in particular does a lot of “pondering” about this unusual son of hers. This is understandably hard to take in.

Is not this Joseph's son? No, it really isn't. It's God's Son becoming one of us, coming as close as you can get to us. *Amazing*—in every sense of the word—astounding and perplexing, marvelous and mysterious. We might cut the Nazareth folk some slack for not grasping all this from the get-go. We might also reclaim for ourselves some of the shocking awe of the incarnate Christ.

But whatever their initial mixed reactions of astonishment, Jesus' home congregation soon erupts with outright demonstrations of anger. When Jesus finishes his sermon, the audience becomes so enraged that they haul him out of the synagogue and try to hurl him off a cliff at the edge of town. Instead of shaking his hand and hugging his neck, they lay violent hands on him and try to wring his neck.

Somehow Jesus manages to escape the lynching and "go on his way." As a prophet without honor on his home turf, Jesus never returns to Nazareth again. Can't say I blame him.

So, what in the world *did* Jesus say in that sermon to set his neighbors and relatives off like that? This was not some petty grumbling over lunch about how the preacher went on too long or said something a bit controversial. *This was mob action, attempted murder.*

Why? First, right after reading the Isaiah text, Jesus flatly announces: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That may not immediately seem provocative, but on closer reflection it packs a wallop. In effect, Jesus makes an audacious personal claim: "Right now, folks—*Today*—what I just read from Isaiah is being fulfilled in your midst; in fact, it's being fulfilled *in me.*"

"The Spirit of the Lord is *upon me*, because he has *sent me* to bring good news to the poor. He has *sent me* to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed." Jesus is appropriating the "me" of Isaiah's text for himself.

Moreover, he declares this year—*starting Today*—the "Year of the Lord's Favor," most likely referring to the Year of Jubilee—a banner year on the Jewish calendar every fiftieth year in which all debts were forgiven, all foreclosed lands restored to original owners, all slaves set free. A year enacting God's infinite grace, mercy, and justice: redemptive grace, restorative mercy, redistributive justice. A radical agenda, if there ever was one.

Jesus indeed makes an "amazing" announcement concerning himself, his mission, and his moment in the salvation history of God's people. Two millennia down the road, we routinely speak and sing about Christ our Lord and Savior, Liberator and Redeemer. But I fear that over time we've become rather too comfortable with this revolutionary "good news," even taking it for granted. But the first time Jesus' people heard this news, it had to be gob-smacking, mind-boggling.

Jesus makes Scripture his own to a breathtaking degree. Scripture will not just inform his life, inspire his life, enrich his life. *It will be his life.* He won't just read the book, study the book, proclaim the book. *He will live the book.*

While Jesus embodies Scripture to a consummate degree we cannot hope to achieve, he sets the pattern for us to follow. As disciples of Christ, we are called to walk as he walked, live as he lived as best we can. And our text makes crystal clear that a big part of a Christ-following life involves bringing good news to the poor and liberating love to those bound by a legion of “demons”—physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually—liberating the *whole person.*

The Isaiah text Jesus reads serves as a manifesto for his mission. It sets the agenda for his entire life and work. Just read the rest of Luke. Almost everything he does fits this Isaiah profile.

The popular slogan *What Would Jesus Do?* has been used and misused to support all sorts of modern agendas? What would Jesus *drive*? What would Jesus *eat*? What would Jesus *tweet*? I have no idea.

If we want to know What Jesus *Would* Do and What *We Should* Do as his followers, we are best advised to look at What Jesus *Did*. He brought good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. In our still very broken world, that's plenty to keep us busy till Christ comes and restores all creation.

Likewise, in our endless “Battles for the Bible”—pushing some pet doctrine or quibbling over theories of interpretation—we do well to unite around what really matters: *incarnating the Book in our lives—as Jesus did—for the sake of those who are bound up and beaten down.*

Again, I stress, that's not easy to do. The Nazareth folk were perplexed about what to do with this program trumpeted by Isaiah and Jesus. And rather than making it easier to handle, Jesus ratchets up the tension.

This good news of liberation is not just for us and ours, Jesus suggests—not just for people who look and think like us, not just for our cozy little congregation here. This is for everybody, all sorts of people.

Remember *Elijah*? (there Jesus goes bringing in more scripture). Remember how that great prophet helped a destitute widow across the border in the Sidonian town of Zarephath. He provided her food during a terrible famine and new life for her critically ill son.

Oh, and remember *Elisha*, too—how he cured the leprosy of that snooty Syrian general, Naaman, who thought his people and lands were better than ours.

Elijah and Elisha were renowned Hebrew prophets who dramatically fulfilled Isaiah's liberating agenda before Isaiah existed. While they aided their fellow-Israelites, they also reached out "across the tracks" to non-Israelites, to Sidonians and Syrians—suspicious folk, sometime enemies of Israel.

The people of Nazareth know these familiar biblical stories, but that doesn't mean they like them or appreciate Jesus' bringing them up now. Why is he thinking about needy people *out there* when we've got plenty of problems *right here* in our town and country? Is he turning his back on us, thumbing his nose at us? Well, if he wants to reach *out there* so much, we'll help him along with a hard, swift kick *out of here*.

Whew! What self-centered, small-minded bigots, these backwater villagers of Nazareth! Oh yes—***just like we can be*** in the capital of the Commonwealth of Virginia where I and thousands of others live—drawing in close, huddling together with *our kind of folk* in fear of "the other," "the different," "the foreigner" out there. Charity starts at home. Fair enough, but it doesn't end there.

If we're really people of the Book and disciples of Christ, as we claim, we should be people with a global vision of care and justice for all, because throughout the Book—Old and New Testaments—we meet a gracious God with an unrelenting purpose: to restore all people, all creation, to God's grand and good design.

We are called to be People on Mission—God's Mission—not with imperious and patronizing condescension, but with sympathetic and liberating compassion, as outlined by Isaiah and fulfilled in Christ. "*Today,*" as Jesus stressed, may God's Jubilee be "fulfilled [afresh] in *our hearing.*" Amen.

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