

I Love/Hate Your Sermon

Luke 4:14-31

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³ He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴ And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers^[d] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Today's *emeron* this *houtos* scripture *graphē* has been fulfilled *plēroō* ·ho inen ·ho your hymn eis earsous."

This is Jesus' first recorded sermon. And it's awesome. Everybody loves it. And they love him. And isn't that the point of preaching? Yet, just when things are going great, Jesus keeps going. He keeps talking, and as he talks, he pokes at the folks gathered in the synagogue—at his *own* people. "I suppose you are just waiting for me to perform a miracle. Guess what? No. I'm not here for you—Elijah and Elisha could have healed their own people. But they gave their gifts to foreigners instead."

Jesus should have stopped sooner. By the time he did stop, the people who had raised him were ready to throw him off a cliff. So... was the sermon in Nazareth a failure... or a success?

There's *so much* in this story that we could talk about. But I want to focus in today on what Jesus *meant* when he read and interpreted this passage from the prophet Isaiah. What was

Jesus saying that made the people so mad? Let's find out. Then, let's try to apply the same message to us, and let's see how we feel. Deal?

Alright. Jesus' first *public* appearance in Luke happens right after his triumph over temptation in the wilderness—remember, he had that harrowing encounter with the tempter, who asked him to use his powers for his own benefit and Jesus resisted? The next place Luke shows Jesus is at a synagogue in Nazareth. He is a teacher of God's word, and he will go to synagogues often to interpret Torah. In this scene, Luke announces what Jesus' ministry is going to be about. Jesus' reveals that he is a **liberation theologian** of the first rate. It should be no surprise—Mary, when she found out she was pregnant, sang to us about a God who pulls the mighty down from their thrones and sends the rich away with empty hands. Jesus declares, "Mom was right. That's me."

God's anointed servant will bring justice for the poor, will be on the side of the oppressed, will free those whose rights are being violated and will bring the year of debt forgiveness required in Deuteronomy.

Jesus' ministry had—and certainly still has—an economic and a political agenda. If a church today is seen by people in our community who are poor as "good," it is a church of Jesus Christ. If a church is enacting liberation by reforming our broken criminal justice system, by expanding voting rights, by insisting on sex and gender equality, and by providing a gracious reception for immigrants and refugees, that is a church of Jesus Christ. If a church is resisting the exploitative dimensions of capitalism, making sure every worker has a living wage, advocating for universal healthcare and free childcare, and preventing corporations from despoiling the earth, that is a church in the spirit of God's anointed servant, Jesus Christ.

If I were to stop my sermon now, how do you feel? Some of you would be delighted by my gracious words. Some might be outraged. We know that the way we respond to sermons is conditioned by our preferences and our biases. We like sermons that re-enforce our view of the world. We resent sermons that suggest that God's plans are different than ours.

Why, then, were those folks in the synagogue happy... then mad as they heard Jesus preach? We have to learn a little bit more to find out.

Jesus read scripture that day from Isaiah 61. It probably wasn't his choice—the synagogues had set readings. But the passage he read from Isaiah is a volatile passage. You should know exactly why.

The book of the prophet Isaiah, taken as a whole, is itself an extraordinary map of the history of Israel. Scholars agree that Isaiah was written and edited together in 3 pieces, at 3 different times over a couple hundred years, by 3 different authors, who had 3 very different social realities about which to reflect theologically. 1st Isaiah, roughly chapters 1-39 is pre-exilic. 1st Isaiah talks about how bad specific rulers were, the spiral towards exile, and the endurance of a "faithful remnant" of God's people. 2nd Isaiah, chapters 40-55, is exilic. 2nd Isaiah promises the

“faithful remnant” will return from Exile. It contains some of the most hopeful language in Scripture. 3rd Isaiah, chapters 56-66, which Jesus is reading from here, is post-Exilic. This means that it dates roughly to the same period as the passage we discussed last week, from Ezra and Nehemiah. If you remember, the drama of that time was how to re-build after the trauma of Exile. Was rebuilding best done with secure walls, strict religious practices, and strong prohibitions against foreigners? That was the perspective of Ezra and Nehemiah.

But 3rd Isaiah talks about re-building the culture in a different way. 3rd Isaiah imagines that people from all over the world will come to Jerusalem to worship because Israel’s God will be recognized by as the true God. Isaiah imagines that the faithful people of God will embrace or signify God’s return by focusing on enacting God’s justice. Sabbath-keeping and other markers of religious identity are important, but it is acting with righteousness that embodies God’s intentions for God’s people. Good news for the poor, release for prisoners, freedom for the oppressed, debt forgiveness. We will know God is with us when there is both faithfulness and righteousness. I hope you hear how 3rd Isaiah offered a different idea of what God’s people should focus be focusing on.

3rd Isaiah is different in one other important way. 3rd Isaiah begins a move in Sacred Scripture from prophecy toward eschatology. I know I just lost some of you because those two words sound like esoteric academic jargon. But this is so important. Stay with me. Most prophets are rooted in the present—they talk about things going on right now. Prophets locate evil within and among us. Because evil is in us, if we repent and turn from it today, a prophet says, God will act to restore God’s people. Prophetic eschatology, however shifts the time for God’s redemptive action. Eschatology takes longer horizon for God’s redemption to take place. God will still save us, but that salvation may happen much later—it may even require God to end this time and create a whole new time. Eschatology also—and this is important—tends to shift the location of evil “outside” of the community. Evil is found not so much in and among us, but in the occupying empires or social structures that are huge and outside of the people’s control. 3rd Isaiah begins to suggest that God may need to create “new heaven and a new earth” before any of us actually see God’s redemption.

In the several hundred years in the life of Israel, between 3rd Isaiah and the time of Jesus, the empires around Israel had grown in strength and size. Finally, the Romans arrived, and the world had never seen armies so strong, domination so overwhelming. As the empires around Israel grew in size, Israel developed a greater and greater appetite for eschatology. God’s deliverance would need to somehow crush the evil empire—it would require some cataclysm, some apocalypse, to defeat that kind of evil. The focus within Israel was less on prophesy, less on repentance, on turning away from the evils in our midst, and envisioning the “Day of the Lord”—the day of our cosmic deliverance.

Jesus walks in that day to the synagogue. Everyone knows him. They watched him grow up before their eyes. Mary and Joseph’s boy. Now, here he is a rabbi, of sorts. A teacher with gracious words. He reads a provocative segment of Isaiah. A section that imagines the anointed servant of God bringing justice. I imagine some of them love the justice talk—just like you do.

Yes, God is about justice, and so should we be! I wonder when that justice will come? Then Jesus says, “this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Now, he’s saying something new. He’s taken this text that imagines a long view of history, one that says we will “get there eventually,” and he’s compressed the timeline. He’s saying that the eschaton, the end of history, is NOW. God has come now. All of the contents of Isaiah’s vision—good news for the poor, release for the captives, debt forgiveness, foreigners coming to worship the true God—God is making all of it happen now.

What would you all do? What would happen if a child of this church showed up here, opened Isaiah and said, “people of North Decatur, the time for God’s final deliverance—and the time for our righteousness on earth is now! The righteous will be drawn into God’s Beloved Community and those deemed unrighteous will be cast out!” I suppose that the most radical of you would say, “let’s go, let’s do this.” I think that was true in Nazareth, too. After all, they were all struggling to get by, all of them living under the boot of the ungodly Roman occupiers. They knew the evil empire needed to fall. Maybe Jesus was right, the time is now! God is here! God will bring justice our people!

Jesus keeps talking. Who said God’s deliverance is for you? Maybe *you* are the ones doing injustice. You think the problems are out there, with someone else? You think the evil lies only with the Romans? Have you noticed all of your daily pettiness, the hurts you inflict on each other, the silences you keep about the injustices around you? The way you have allowed your lives to be so conformed to evil, so comfortable with evil, that you no longer even see it? Maybe you, as God’s people, should have learned righteousness long ago. Maybe you’ve been blaming it all on the big “systemic” oppression, waiting for God to come and deliver you from your enemy, and you failed to see all of the ways you are the enemy of God’s righteousness.

Our God is a God of the oppressed who demands an end to oppression. Our God loves the poor not in spite of who they are but because of it. Our God releases captives. Our God forgives every debt. Our God demands not only faithfulness but righteousness. Our God, we know, one day will come and deliver God’s people. That day is today.

This scripture is fulfilled in your ears. The arc of history is being fulfilled before your eyes.

Just don’t—whatever you do, don’t—assume that you are on the right side of history.

How do you feel now? Do you love the sermon, or hate it?

Let the whole church say, amen.