

Evangelicals by Another Name
(Luke 4:21 – 30)
January 30, 2022

Jesus preaches his first sermon in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth – a special occasion. The sermon of Jesus is the first Christian sermon in history (See Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching*). Here is the model for our preaching: Jesus reads a text and interprets it with a pair of stories. Surely stories can't make trouble for a preacher, right?

This Sabbath worship in Nazareth started nicely. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Any preacher would die for that kind of riveted attention. Hometown boy in the pulpit. People whispering to one another: 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

"Doesn't he read well?" "This young man is going places." Anyone ever say such things about you when you were young? Or did they say, 'He'll be in prison before he's twenty?' "His granddaddy was a crook; his daddy is a crook; he will be a crook; all those McKinstrys are crooks."

When I was 12, the church made me a preacher. But what they said was, "He reads well. He's sickly; will never be able to hold a real job. Let's make him a preacher." Had they known what kind of preacher I would become, they would have made me a pulp wood hauler.

Jesus reads from the sacred scroll. No one has ever gotten angry with the reader of the Scripture. It is the interpretation of the text that causes the pot of religious extremism to boil over and cause trouble. The shock is not in the text; the shock is Jesus offering an unacceptable interpretation.

Today, this is more trouble than ever because everybody has an interpretation. Interpretation, like truth, has been kidnapped by freedom. Yesterday, on the news I heard a woman say, "I don't want any facts that interfere with my beliefs."

Jesus told the people stories they already knew by heart. No problem there. We all love stories. One of the joys of being a pastor is sitting around with a family telling their stories. David Brooks wrote a NY Times essay about resume or eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?

Then Jesus uses Old Testament stories to remind his congregation that God cares for the needs of foreigners: a Canaanite widow and a Syrian general. Jesus gives new meanings to old stories. These stories touch on the nature of God. What kind of God do we have? We have a God who welcomes strangers and foreigners and loves them and cares for them.

We should take time to peek at the stories. I Kings 17 tells the story of a widow down to her last meal and Elijah asks her to feed him that last meal. Just like a preacher – will take the food from your table, huh? Then the surprise: “The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.” God’s abundance is enacted. That’s the story of Elijah and it’s dangerous. It’s about another kind of power – God’s power to give life that politics can’t give.

Naaman, high-ranking general of Syria, was a leper. He came to Elisha for healing. He expected the preacher to make a fuss over him. The arrogance of Naaman speaks of the arrogance that often keeps company with the powerful: “I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!” I think this is what people often expect of preachers. Give us a little song and dance. Wave your hands, speak magic words, and give me what I want now. Instead, the preacher ignores the general and says, “Oh, go jump in the Jordan River seven times.” Brueggemann says, “It was a little like, “Take two aspirin and call me in the morning!” When the powerful man got over his snit fit, his pouting, he did as the preacher told him to do, and he was healed. God’s power on display. Again, note that Elisha does what the king could not do.

Those are the two stories Jesus told, but, like a Cajun chef, he added spice: Israel was filled with poor widows, “yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zare-phath in Sidon.” And Israel was crawling with lepers, but “none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” Jesus is reminding the people that God has always loved foreigners – everyone in the world – but they had forgotten it and they had turned the love of God into spite, anger, prejudice, and hatred. They remembered when Solomon dedicated the Temple and prayed: “When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, and then they pray toward this place, confess your name, and turn from their sin, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel.” So, if there was a drought, God should send the prophets to the widows of

Israel not Sidon. They no longer remembered that Solomon also prayed: “Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you.” The people, treating biblical texts, principles, commands, and ideas like consumer products, pick and choose what they are comfortable believing. I’m reminding you that a people can forget their own stories. Look, you can have a story and then you can keep the story but lose the meaning. Or you can change the meaning to suit you. Or you can forget the story and make up a new story. Americans are in the stage of just making s... up.

We are dismantling what rhetorical scholar Joshua Gunn calls the “Third Thing.” The Third Thing is a governing set of logics and meanings that render discourse intelligible to members of any given society. The “Third Thing” represents the traditions, the understandings of what constitutes a people as a holy people of God or a people as a democracy. Everything we thought was nailed down is coming loose. Gunn argues there is the disappearance, erasure, or erosion of a Third Thing (Gunn, 53). It’s like being a genius at running a computer program and during the night someone installs a bug and changes all your commands and prompts and you can’t make heads or tails of it. Dismantled. Disrupted. This is what is happening in America.

Let’s face it: the sermon fails. No one shook Jesus’ hand and said, “Nice sermon, rabbi.” No one said, “I liked your sermon. Let’s go to lunch.” The Nazarenes knew better, but they didn’t want to admit it. They were determined to be free, unwilling to be bound by anything, not even the truth from God.

How could a story sermon make so many people so angry? We should understand. The company needs a new CEO and there are strong candidates right here in our town, but the job goes to some slick-talking, resume-blaster from New York City. Angry? Of course. We don’t like to be left out or overlooked. When I was a 16-year-old kid, I went out for our high school baseball team. 65 kids shows up for practice on a February day. I never got to throw a pitch or swing at a ball. The coach picked the team that night, and I didn’t make it. The coach was actually a football coach and this was his first year. I was really angry that I didn’t make the team. My

summer league coach called the high school coach that night and told him that I had been 12-0 in summer league as a pitcher, a left-handed pitcher with control. He told him that I made the All-Star team and that I should be pitching for the high school that Spring. The next day, at school, the coach gave me a uniform. I was so excited, but as you can tell, I still have some residual resentment.

The Nazarenes were a proud people. Small town folk can have a chip on their shoulder, a sense of insecurity that shows up in public as excess pride.

Make no mistake these are proud people. These are Bible people. They were instructed in the law, sure that they were a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth. This is crucial because we too claim to be Bible people “because Jesus tells us so.” These are fiercely nationalistic people – patriots.

Nazareth was a center for nationalistic zeal. The word originally meant to turn red around the neck. Nazarenes were the original Red Necks, the Nazarene Proud Boys. They stashed weapons, plotted insurrection, carried curved swords under robes in case they had a chance to murder a Roman soldier or official. Nazareth had a reputation – not a good one. James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples were called “Sons of Thunder.” No wonder Jesus offends them. He hits at the heart of their nationalistic ambitions. You might say they were Jewish nationalists.

Now, do we get it? Good people, proud people, Bible people, patriotic people can get sideways with the will of God and allow anger to control even their beliefs. They were angry at the truth because Jesus did tell the truth. They were angry at Jesus because he dared to tell the truth. We have a twisted relationship with the truth at times.

Jesus didn’t preach to anger people; he preached to offer people a chance to repent. The gospel is offered to us every Sunday with a view toward repentance. Here is the part of Solomon’s prayer that his own people now completely ignored: “O Lord, if your people come to their senses, and repent of their sins.” Paul says in Romans 1, “They knew God, but they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” We honor God by accepting the truth.

A great philosopher has said, "The real difficulty is the will, not the intellect. What is hard is to will oneself to accept things that are true that one doesn't want to believe. It takes effort and courage, not mere intellectual acuity or belief to face the truth that we don't like." Such an act of the will is called repentance – a changing of the mind. It takes strength, fiber, determination, courage to acknowledge truth you don't want to admit. Repentance is like brain surgery, maybe a brain transplant.

If God says change, let's change. If God says, turn, let's turn. If God says, repent, let's repent. Let's dig deep and face our inner demons and move through the anger and repent. Repent! Repent! This will be our salvation if we have the courage.