

9 Words Say It All

The Rev'd Harry Krauss
Grace Church in New York
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 23, 2022

One of the shortest sermons I ever heard was preached on a Sunday quite a few years ago at the Church of the Advent in Boston. It was a frightfully hot summer's day, almost 100 F outside and even hotter inside. The palm fans were going at quite a pace. The rector, Harris Collingwood, mounted that rather grand pulpit, looked out over the wilting congregation, and said the usual, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen." Then we heard, "I expect that many of you are hoping that the sermon will be very short on this very hot morning. Your wish is granted. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." Out of the pulpit he went and the service continued. The sigh of relief was audible.

This morning, however, Jesus offers an even shorter sermon, thought by many to be his first. But I'll claim that it's perhaps the most moving and extraordinary sermon we might ever hear. I'll also tell you that every time I've heard it read or tried to read it, I've realized how very little I've ever managed to say to these many years in the pulpit. Here it is, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Only 9 words. Obviously this sermon didn't take place in Boston. But it did take place in the synagogue, the center of all activity, in Jesus' home town, Nazareth.

We're told that he stood up to read a lesson. He was handed a scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah, which he unrolled and then offered three straight forward verses, (Isaiah 61: 1, 2; 58: 6) "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." He sat down, everybody was staring at him and then he preached the words I've already quoted.

Can you imagine having been in that synagogue? This wasn't the distinguished High Priest from the Temple in Jerusalem. It was just Jesus, Jesus who grew up right there in Nazareth. Now, of all things, he is telling his family, friends, and neighbors that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, he has been anointed, he has been sent to proclaim release, recovery, liberty, and the acceptable year of the Lord. Can you imagine that? More to the point, could they imagine that? But that's in the Gospel for next week. Stay tuned.

But what might we reflect on this morning? In my view, it never hurts to take a look at what has led up to any biblical event we might be interested in. We could have a look at Isaiah and his rich and compelling work of prophecy. As with any prophet Isaiah can be hard going. The prophet's job is to tell it as it is, or should I say, as it ought to be. Make no mistake, when I say "as it ought to be" I don't mean some sort of crystal ball prediction. Rather the prophet points you and me to what God has described as life from the very beginning: to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our mind, and all of our strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Furthermore, a prophet insists that we should never, ever forget that this is our life-long calling.

But today there are at least two sections of background which might enrich this extraordinary sermon by Jesus. In the first lesson from the Book of Nehemiah we meet the children of Israel in the second half of the fifth century before Jesus lived. We get the great privilege of joining them as they begin to enjoy their second great experience of freedom, this time from captivity in Babylon. If we were standing with them we would have heard the scholar Ezra read to

them from the law of Moses. If we were standing with them we might have been as touched as they were and also burst into tears. We would have been sent away by Ezra and told not to weep, but to have a feast, share it with others, and be joyful. I think he was suggesting something more than a coffee hour.

Why have I reviewed this story? Am I just a fan of the often difficult-to-understand Old Testament? As we were standing with the children of Israel we were meant to pick up that they had the idea that when they listened to the reading of the law they were hearing the voice of the living God. And more than that, he was speaking right to them. I hope that you've had that experience, at least in some small way. When I was on the staff at Saint Thomas Church uptown, Evensong was sung almost every day. As the Book of Common Prayer suggests we worked our way through the whole of the 150 Psalms each month. I cannot tell you how many times, though I'd sung a certain psalm many times before, on a particular evening I was sure that the psalm was speaking directly to me. Maybe it was the exquisite music, maybe it was because I was really awake after a very busy day, but it was as if I'd never heard that psalm before and it was addressing every issue in my life at that moment. Was God speaking to me at the corner of 53rd and Fifth Avenue? Once or twice a tear rolled down one of these cheeks.

You see, the children of Israel just didn't toss around that phrase "the living word" as a sweet piety. They meant it. It's not just a matter of if we were standing with the children of Israel and if we were hearing Ezra read, word on word. It's not just a matter of if we were standing in the synagogue in Nazareth hearing Jesus read word on word. It is the matter that every time we hear Holy Scripture read, it is still "the living word." This very day, for example, in our hearing Jesus Christ is speaking directly to you and me every bit as much as he did in that synagogue. He is telling us the same good news, that he proclaims release, recovery, liberty, acceptance of the Lord. Should this not make us consider having a good cry too? Jesus is engaging us in his calling to turn the world right side up.

The other section of the backdrop is what Luke tells us in the earlier part of chapter 4, the bit before today's gospel lesson. He writes this, "Then Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted by the devil for forty days." (Luke 4: 1-2) Lest we forget, Jesus is preparing himself for the beginning of his ministry, his life's work. Jesus ended up in the wilderness and was tempted by the devil. No job counseling for him. No workshops at \$300.00 a session in downtown Jerusalem.

Rather he started his calling in dire circumstances, to say the least. He ended up in a part of Judea where the hills are heaps of dust, the limestone is disintegrating, and the rocks are jagged and mean. Yet it's the kind of situation we might have been in sometime or might be in this morning. Things are all wrong. It's dry. It's barren. It's hot. It seems there's no way out and we feel abandoned. How can we move ahead from a place like this to do anything, let alone our life's work? But this is where we find ourselves.

If that weren't enough the devil shows up to throw the basic distractions of life at Jesus, temptations to be absolutely self-sufficient, to have all authority, and to show himself as the Messiah and that he was superior to God. What a tactic. It's the same one he always uses. The devil used it in the Old Testament. We see it now in the New Testament. And look around you, he's using it right now. And that's the difficulty. It's so regular, so ordinary. We're taken in by it much of the time. Jesus is showing us we don't have to be. Crudely put, I suggest that the wilderness, the temptations of the devil are OJT for anyone's life work; Jesus' or ours.

But to authentically start and complete his ministry Jesus is living real, everyday life just as we must. He must actually experience what you and I do. What was it St. Paul told the folks in

Corinth (I Corinthians 10: 13) “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it.”

And this at long last brings us back to where we started from, Morning Prayer in the Nazareth Synagogue. It is there that Jesus ministry and life’s work gets underway and just maybe if ours hasn’t yet started, it might get moving too. If nothing else, I hope that you’ve picked up on my idea that you and I are part of this gospel episode and there’s no getting out of it. If we’re in our own wilderness or tussling with the lure of the devil’s distractions we could be marvelously glib and say that the only way is up. However, I believe that Isaiah’s words which Jesus very firmly proclaimed are the description of what he had been, was, and will always be concerned with and they also are a statement about what can be our life’s work. They could prove that what St. Paul told the Corinthians is true.

What’s been going on for the last two years? We’re in a wilderness. How can we focus on anything? What’s going to happen next? Will we have the money we need, the medicine to keep us alive, the strength and energy to make it to tomorrow? How much longer will those who have not continue to be sidelined and cheated of opportunity and a safe life? Or are chronic illness, pain, depression, and family issues rearing their ugly heads in our midst?

Does it take a superstar theologian to observe that Jesus calls us away from what might be called violence, rivalry, domination, and selfishness which are the foundation stones of the wilderness? Does it take such an expert to see that Jesus offers us instead release from distractions, recovery from poverty and disease, liberty from oppression of all sorts, and the strength and courage of the Spirit of the Lord?

In his provocative course book, *Witnesses for Christ*, Edward Markquart puts it this way, “God’s story is always related to human need. For example, if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel is God’s strong word of resurrection. If a person is permeated with guilt, the gospel is God’s assurance of forgiveness... For the homeless refugee, the gospel may be freedom in a new homeland... The gospel is always related to human need. It is never truth in a vacuum.”

Ezra reading the Law of Moses, Jesus delivering his short sermon. A road out of the wilderness, a way to leave the devil in the dust, the call to join Jesus in setting things right; how’s that for Good News?

+