
READING A SERMON

LUKE 4:14-21

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 2019,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

My favorite gospel writer with one of the best names a person could have—Luke—presents the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. What you heard this morning has been called Jesus’ initial sermon or inaugural address. “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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” These words from the prophet Isaiah could be called his state of the union address or vision and mission statement for ministry or to use business speak, his BHAG, his Big Hairy Audacious Goal. I do understand why many commentators call it a ‘sermon.’ He stood up to read, unrolled the scroll, then rolled up the scroll and sat down. And we also hear that when he began to teach in synagogues, he “was praised by everyone” but if you read further down in the story, which isn’t included in today’s lectionary, you hear that the same people who praised him “were filled with rage” [at his words]. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the top of the hill... so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” From praise to rage from the same people. Indeed, a true sign that it was a sermon—one day, cheers, the next day, jeers, because sermons can never please everyone! So from this perspective, it would seem as if this was indeed Jesus’ first sermon as most commentators say.

But I want to make my own comment today. Most commentators call it a ‘sermon’ because they assume that when Jesus stood up to read—and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him and he unrolled the scroll—he read it aloud. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant and sat back down. But the biblical text never says that Jesus read the Isaiah scripture aloud in that synagogue. Of course, we can assume this is what was done because the public reading of scripture in synagogues was normative. But the Bible never says that he read the scripture aloud. All it says is that he stood up to read, the scroll was given to him, he unrolled the scroll, found the place where it was written, rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, and sat down. That’s what the Good Book says! It never says he read it.

So what if Jesus didn’t read the Word but the people still heard the Word? What if they heard by sight, by seeing the Word made flesh right in front of them? What if they heard the Word with their eyes? We’re told that “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” after he sat down. As the gospel story is told, we, the readers, can track the body movement of Jesus as he stood and unrolled the scroll and rolled up the scroll and sat down. The story draws our mind’s eyes to him and his movement up and down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue “were fixed on him.” This was the case because Jesus was the fulfillment of the Isaiah passage right before their very own eyes. Jesus didn’t have to read it because he was it. They heard the prophet Isaiah with their eyes.

Jesus didn’t have to read it because he was the Word and they saw the Word, the incarnate Word, which is why Jesus “began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” Again, perhaps, they heard with their sight as their eyes were fixed on him, the Word who was the fulfillment of the prophecy. It may be hard to believe but one can hear with your eyes. And you can see truth with your eyes. Remember what Maya Angelou said? “When people show you who they are, believe them!” Here, Jesus shows himself to be the anointed one, the Messiah, the one who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, the one who brings “good news to the poor, proclaims release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” That scripture was fulfilled in their hearing even though Jesus never read it aloud. They heard with spiritual eyes because you can hear the Word without words. Poet Edgar Guest’s opinion was “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.” A Word without words. It is possible to see a sermon, a Word made flesh. And the people in the synagogue see the embodied sermon of God’s anointed Word.

Jesus shows those in the synagogue who he is and they hear it loud and clear, which is why they eventually want to throw him off a cliff because often people can't handle the truth even when it's standing right in front of them. They see or 'read' God's sermon of love to the world in Jesus, giving new meaning to 'reading a sermon.'

To 'read a sermon' is to think of it in the vein of Sojourner Truth, the African American evangelist, abolitionist, women's rights activist and author and former slave, who is well-known for her 1851 speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" who said, "I don't read such small stuff as letters. I read men and nations." If we are honest, we are reading people all the time and people are reading your life, the sermon you preach with your actions.

So what Jesus shows us is that there is such a thing as a sermon without words. A typical sermon is not really what's on the page or manuscript anyway, but is what's off the page. As with music, notes on the page are not the music, the music is what is sung and heard. The sermon is the music off the page, orally, aurally, and visually. And this life sermon has no time limit unlike my sermon from this pulpit today. This sermon without words that Jesus shows us consists of the music made by your life.

In this gospel story, the people see the Word and thus hear it loud and clear. This suggests to us that we are sermons. You are a sermon. You are the embodiment of the gospel. You are the word of God that people hear when they watch you and study your life performance. And it's the Spirit that allows us to become the enfleshment of the word just as Jesus was "filled with the power of the Spirit" to do his ministry. And the word we speak is the one we proclaim with our lives as we "bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This sermon is one in which the Word is made flesh through your life ethic, not your rhetoric. As emeritus divinity professor Rick Lischer writes in *End of Words*, "It's not better performances the church needs, but truer characters." The challenge is to work and pray toward congruency between who you are and what you do and say. I often tell students the most difficult sermon you will ever preach is the one you proclaim with your life. Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor who preached and taught here at Duke in the past wrote, "If there is a grand incongruity between what is being said and the one who is saying it, it is like sounding brass or a clanging cymbal."

People are reading the sermon you write with the script of your life in time and space. People are looking to see whether you know how to preach the gospel with your mouth shut. This notion has roots in the wisdom of the ancient Church. In what is considered to be the first homiletical textbook, *On Christian Doctrine*, written in the 4th-5th century, St. Augustine teaches this: "the life of the speaker has greater weight in determining whether he is obediently heard than any grandness of eloquence. For he who speaks wisely and eloquently, but lives wickedly, may benefit many students, although, as it is written, he 'is unprofitable to his own soul.'...they benefit many by preaching what they do not practice; but many more would be benefited if they were to do what they say...[people] do not obediently hear one who does not hear himself, and they condemn the word of God which is preached to them along with the preacher himself...[let the preacher] so order his life that he not only prepares a reward for himself, but also so that he offers an example to others, and his way of living may be, as it were, an eloquent speech."

Your life can be an eloquent sermon that others read. We need these kinds of sermons in our day of fake news, bad news, sad news. We need to hear with our eyes the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because as Dr. King once said in a sermon, "it's possible to affirm the existence of God with your lips and deny God's existence with your life." Jesus shows us another way because He is the incarnate Word he speaks. His lip service matches his life service. Even if he never reads that Isaiah scripture, his life spoke the truth of that Word and the people hear it loud and clear. "Jesus' life was the 'amen' to the proclamation on his lips"(James Forbes). He was the Word of God in both word and deed.

And on this communion Sunday, we know Jesus preached a sermon that changed the course of history and he didn't even use words. Jesus' body spoke. Jesus' body broke. When he was wounded for our transgressions, his body was talking. When he was bruised for our iniquities, his body was talking. When he was hung high and stretched wide, his body was talking. When he was oppressed and afflicted and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent so he did not open his mouth, his body was talking. He preached an eloquent cruciform

sermon with his mouth shut as his body did the talking. His body says all that needs to be said to us. But if you need a translation, here it is: This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.

What a sermon. Some of the best sermons don't even use words because sometimes words aren't enough. Sometimes it takes a body, even our body, to preach the gospel of God. Last week, a 22 year old young man, Corey Borg-Massanari, was buried in an avalanche for about 20 minutes at Taos Ski Valley in New Mexico. Though crews rescued him and airlifted him to a hospital, this past Monday his family confirmed his death. But before his unexpected death, Corey signed up to be an organ donor. So although he died, Corey gave life to someone through his gift of organ donation. As he was wheeled to his final surgery, the staff of the University of New Mexico Hospital lined the walls to do what they call an "Organ Donor Walk of Honor." All mortal flesh kept silence in this final procession yet there was a clear Word without words as Corey was wheeled to surgery: "This is my body given for you." Corey's life was the 'amen' to the proclamation on his lips. What a sermon. May it be so for us as well in life or in death. Amen.