

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 26, 2025

Lousy Preaching

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My job requires that I be something of a student of rhetoric. You'll find volumes in my library of speeches and sermons from great speakers of different times. You can learn a great deal about someone by the rhetoric they prefer to use, their favorite techniques for the use of cadence, alliteration, emotive language, logical appeals; their use of different strategies like appealing to authority or tradition, utilizing strawman arguments, whataboutism, "no true Scotsman" appeals, and any number of different ways to convincing people to your point of view. And that's the point after all, convincing people to see things your way.

It strikes me that from that point of view Jesus, at least in our pericope this morning, is a pretty lousy preacher. One of the first things a preacher or speaker needs to consider when employing rhetoric is their audience. What does my audience want to hear? What appeals might work in changing their perspective? What common framework can I use to make my points clearly and effectively? Jesus seems to do little to none of this preparatory work before preaching in his hometown synagogue.

So let's do that work for him! Nazareth in the 1st century was a small village, likely having no more than 500 occupants.¹ Nazareth was located in the region of Galilee, some 90 miles north of Jerusalem. While predominantly Jewish, there would have been some Roman, Greek, and Syrian residents too. The area relied primarily on fishing and agriculture for its economy.

¹ E. Meyers & J. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, & Early Christianity* Nashville: Abingdon, 1981; Article "Nazareth" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

The people gathered in the synagogue of Nazareth would have been mostly hardworking fishermen, farmers, and ranchers. Their main preoccupation was likely keeping the Roman tax collectors off their backs. They have been raised hearing the promise of a Messiah to come from David's line. A Messiah who would be Israel's greatest king; one who would kick the Romans out and make Israel great again.

Now, given that background, what would you preach on? If you wanted to get this group of people on your side, what would be your approach? I can tell you what I think would work pretty well.

When offered that scroll from Isaiah, Jesus should have set it aside and requested Nehemiah or Ezra. I mean, did you catch that reading from Nehemiah? The people hear the Law, repent, rededicate themselves to the Law and traditions, and they are promised that the Lord would take joy in their strength. That sort of hearkening back to a mythical golden time of "Law and Order" is much more appealing than the complexities of real life!

If he really wanted to rile the crowd up, evidence suggests that he should have read from the end of Nehemiah, or from certain sections of Ezra. Readings of scripture that rail against foreigners and foreign influence. Nationalistic readings that could be quotes from politicians today. Those would have played better than Isaiah!

But if you have to read from the scroll of Isaiah, why that section? It would have been far easier to proof-text Isaiah, cutting from different portions of the scroll to concoct a narrative that this audience wants to hear. A narrative about insiders and outsiders, and how everything will be easier if we just identify and deal with the correct scapegoat. Never mind that the scapegoat can so easily change as convenience dictates.

But Jesus does none of this! It's almost as though convincing people to his point of view isn't really his goal here. Instead, Jesus seems preoccupied with proclamation. And proclamation has to do with truth rather than rhetoric. Christ's divine proclamation, in particular, is laden gospel truth, the truth of God's deep and abiding love for people and creation and the truth of the Way

we are invited to live righteously. As history will prove, this is not a popular message.

As a matter of fact, once the reality of the gospel proclamation Jesus makes in Nazareth sinks in, the people there will NO respond positively. We'll be engaging with the Presentation of our Lord texts next Sunday, but if we used the Epiphany 4 texts we would hear how this congregation will respond to Jesus' proclamation by trying to throw him off a cliff! From a rhetorical point of view, this is an abject failure! From that point of view, Jesus is often a lousy preacher.

But if your concern is walking the Way of Christ. If you have experienced the deep and abiding love of God and want to share it with others. Then you have to be concerned with truth rather than rhetoric. Your focus must be on how best to serve others, rather than manipulate them. From that point of view, well...Jesus is a great preacher. But let's be honest, that truth is often difficult for us to hear too. The temptation is great to sink our heads in the sand, or stay in our comfortable echo chambers. But that is the way of the world, not the Way of Christ.

It's from this point of view that we can hear Bishop Budde's words from the National Cathedral and hear the truth in them. God does call powerful people to have mercy on the vulnerable. The good Bishop's words were poor rhetoric...but powerful truth. Lousy preaching **for** power...prophetic proclamation of truth **too** power. Exactly the sort of sermon Jesus preached in Nazareth.

For after all, what does "good news to the poor" mean? How about "release to the captives," "recovery of sight to the blind," setting "free those who are oppressed," and proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor"?² All of those things have to do with justice and wholeness. Meaning all those who currently benefit from injustice and who take advantage of division and conflict will lose their power!

² Luke 4:18c-19 (NRSVUE)

That congregation in Nazareth wanted to hear how Jesus was going to help **them**, not the least and lowly! People in power want to hear how God will bless **their** agenda, not be told that they should pay attention to God's agenda!

To walk the Way of Christ means to be people of the truth. Or, as Luther put it, a theologian of the Cross calls a thing what it is. It means echoing the OT Prophets and calling on our leaders to care for the widow, the orphan, and the resident alien. It means speaking out against racist policies aimed at punishing people merely seeking refuge and asylum; people often fleeing conditions in their home countries largely caused by US Foreign Policy. It means speaking out on behalf of our trans siblings, who are being targeted for simply existing. It means speaking truth to power. It means putting our very lives on the line to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, as Christ did.

Walking the Way of Christ means being a lousy preacher from a rhetorical perspective. It's also liable to land us in hot water. But it's the gospel truth of God's love for ALL PEOPLE and for ALL OF CREATION and what that might mean for how we live our lives. And it's what we're called to proclaim. So go proclaim it. Amen.