

Compelling Preaching, January 17, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Psalm 146; Luke 4.14-30

“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.”

Prayer

As someone who spends a lot of time preparing and delivering sermons, I’ve had to ask myself, “what is it that makes a good sermon?” There are good and bad sermons, better and worse sermons, but I think the general recipe for a good sermon is pretty simple: The preacher must refer to scripture and preach the gospel/“Good News”. For a better and more effective sermon, the preacher should connect with the audience and then reinforce and/or challenge their core beliefs. And for a really effective sermon, the preacher will elicit a response from the audience. If you don’t enjoy a sermon you hear being preached, it’s usually because the preacher hasn’t connected with you—because referring to scripture and preaching the gospel are just the basics. But *sometimes*, the reason we don’t like the sermon is because the preacher *does* connect with us but rather than simply reinforcing what we already believe, the preacher challenges our beliefs. That can be uncomfortable.

But before I look at that in more detail, let’s have a look at how the most influential person in the history of the world preached. How did Jesus go about preaching? Did he look at scripture? Definitely. Did he preach the Good News? I don’t think there can be much argument—Jesus not only *preached* the “Good News,” but he *was* the Good News. Now, for that next-level preaching: did Jesus connect with his audience? Did he meet them where they were? I think that’s clear. They heard him and followed him all over the place so that they might hear even more from him. And did he reinforce and/or challenge their beliefs? It seems that he did. He even got to that final tier, that very challenging mark of good preachers: he elicited a response. An immediate response in some cases. Think of the spontaneous declarations of faith or conversion in the gospels. Zacchaeus springs to mind—but also the disciples who left everything to follow him.

In the instance we heard today, in Jesus’ first sermon in his hometown, (who is returning after some time away and after his baptism), Jesus unrolls the scroll and reads from Isaiah (referring to scripture). Then he preaches the good news to the

poor, captives, blind, and oppressed. In his message he connects with his audience and challenges their beliefs, making them see that God is God of *all* people, and not merely of the descendants of Abraham. He makes them uncomfortable by implying that God, if God doesn't get a response from Israel, will take God's blessings to the gentiles.

And in bringing this challenging message to the people of his hometown, Jesus is able to elicit a response from those gathered in the synagogue. An immediate and dramatic response.

They try to kill him. Immediately. Angrily (as should be obvious).

It is a very dramatic moment that the evangelist brushes aside quite nonchalantly.

"When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

I have no idea how Jesus did this. I'm fascinated with his escape, certainly. I don't know if this was a miracle or some stealthy ninja stuff or if it was like making one's way out of the floor area at a concert or if the people changed their mind somehow...

But I'm also really fascinated with how Jesus was able to get that kind of a response.

I have to admit that I'm more than a little jealous. I want to give powerful sermons too! I want people to be affected by what I say. I want them to react, dramatically and immediately.

Of course, Jesus wasn't preaching to a people who have been historically proud of their "stiff upper lip," so it's not quite the same context. But I have only very rarely gotten an emphatic "Amen!" out of the congregation—and that's only after I complained that nobody every reacted with an "amen" to my sermons! I've never had (that I know of, anyway) anybody dramatically change their life from the moment they heard one of my sermons. I've never had anybody look visibly angry at me or yell in argument. I've never even had anybody walk out during my

sermon, angrily or silently. Well, except maybe online. I wouldn't know if somebody walked out of an online sermon.

But is that really the goal? To get a reaction? *Any* reaction? Because if that was all I was after, there's another route I could follow—a formulaic way to incite the reaction of a murderous mob.

We've seen this unfold over the past four years. All I would have to do is tell lies repeatedly. Tell my rapt audience that the world is against them. That only I understand them and support them. That I am working hard every day to make sure that they are heard. That I love them. That they are very special.

And then I would continue the lies by saying that their voices were disregarded by some other people. *Those* bad guys *over there*. That their vote was stolen. And I would lie again and say that I was going with them, that *together* we would show our strength and together we would make sure people heard us.

We've seen that murderous mob.

And we know that that sermon, while it may have connected deeply with the audience, and while it may have challenged them and elicited an immediate response, it *wasn't* based on scripture and, perhaps most importantly, there *wasn't* any good news.

I think it is clear that eliciting a reaction is not the first priority. That the scripture and the gospel need to be first.

And there is a role for the audience to play in this process as well. Or, in the case of a church, we would probably use the word "congregation". Those of us who are listening are not robots. We are not being programmed. The speaker or the preacher cannot possibly connect with us if we refuse to listen. If we actively resist any attempts to connect with us or to challenge us or to teach us.

But surely *that's* not the goal either—to resist any attempts to challenge or change us. To sit in a church week after week (or, in front of our computer monitors as the case may be), and be completely unaffected. To leave the message *exactly the same as we were before*. Unchanged.

Allowing ourselves to be open, allowing ourselves to connect to a speaker and the message can be scary. It can be uncomfortable. We might not like what we hear.

After all, what if the message really resonates with us? It may actually compel us to change. To react. To respond.

And if we *really* don't like that message and how it challenges us and our previously held beliefs, how are we to respond? With anger? Violence? Do we murderously try to contain the offensive message or messenger?

What is even *more* difficult than allowing these angry emotions to take over is to reflect on the message. Look at ourselves. Question ourselves. Ask ourselves some challenging questions and, where necessary, respond. Grow. *Learn*. And it is in this growth and learning that we may be challenged even further. To see ourselves as the hands and feet of God and confront the evil that we see. To speak up when we hear others spreading lies and misinformation.

That can be *very* scary. Especially when we have to confront our family or our friends. Especially when that confrontation might put us in harm's way. When it puts us between the angry mob and their target—or makes *us* the target.

The psalmist tells us "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help." Our elected leaders, (our "princes") will not always do the right thing. They live in fear of making their constituents happy. They seek to please people and keep their positions of influence and power. Their primary concern is not the truth. But at the same time the psalmist reminds us, "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God."

When we speak up for truth and to defend the marginalized and defenseless, we may face trouble. We may face hardship. It may make things more difficult than if we just stayed quiet and sat back and let them happen. It may make things very uncomfortable. It might even cause us to fear our lives.

Why would we do that? Why would we risk our own comfort, our own safety to protect others? To defend the truth?

Isn't that what Jesus did for us? Laid down his life for our sake?

Even more powerful than mere words is the strength of this compelling example by our Saviour, our God, and our role model. When things are difficult, may we remember that our *help*, now and always, is in our God. Our *hope* is in the Lord our God.