

## **“Listening to the Man: Gone to Meddling”**

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

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*Isaiah 61:1-4 and Luke 4:16-30*

Our first lesson comes from the book of Isaiah, the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter. Like the portion of Isaiah I read from last week, most scholars believe this was probably written after the end of the Babylonian exile in 538 B.C. Although the people have returned to their homeland, they have grown weary with the work of resettlement and reconstruction. The people's captors have been defeated, but their concerns about security and provision have not ended. Doubts are arising about God's presence in their midst and what difference that would make anyway, and they have forgotten who they are called to be. So the prophet speaks up, using words that will later find their way into Jesus' mouth.

The words Isaiah speaks have been regarded as a Servant Song - a description of what the Messiah would look like, or what the people of God as a whole should consider themselves to be. Whether Isaiah is looked upon as the author himself claiming the mantle of the Anointed One, or predicting such a figure to come, or calling on the people themselves to claim that mantle, Isaiah is clear about what the One who is set apart by God should be and do. As you hear the passage, you should know that “the year of the Lord's favor” was an allusion to the Year of Jubilee, instituted by a provision in Leviticus 25 that every forty-nine years, all debts would be forgiven, slaves would be set free, and all forms of injustice would be righted. Historians and economists are quick to point out that there is no evidence that this Year of Jubilee was ever practiced in ancient Israel, but you can understand why such a provision like that would indeed be good news for the poor. Listen for God's word to us in the book of Isaiah. *Read Isaiah here.*

Our passage from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke gives us the first detailed story of Jesus' public ministry in Luke's gospel. Up to this point in Luke, the adult Jesus has been baptized by John in the Jordan and led by the spirit for forty days of temptation and preparation. Now, filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returns to Galilee where reports about him are spreading throughout the countryside. Luke doesn't make a point of saying exactly why he is getting such a reputation, but looking at Matthew's account of the same events, you might assume reports about him are spreading because he has been proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and curing disease. Unlike Matthew, Luke simply portrays Jesus (at this point) as going from synagogue to synagogue teaching. But the first visit to a synagogue that Luke gives us any detail about is Jesus' visit to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth.

As you hear the account of it read, think about why Luke would put this story right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and what this story says about who Jesus is and what is important to him. It is sort of a mission statement for his ministry. Note, too, that he is in a synagogue among his own people and that he is reading and interpreting scripture - something that any adult Jewish male might have been asked to do. Notice that Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah (that might have been the Torah portion for the day, like our lectionary reading for a Sunday), or he might have asked to be handed the scroll of Isaiah. His version of the first two verses of Isaiah is slightly different than the one I read earlier. For example, he leaves out the day of vengeance but he does proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the “Jubilee Year”.

Also, pay attention to how the people in his hometown react to his reading, and how their mood changes as he moves from reading the scripture to teaching its meaning. One reason why their mood

might have changed is because when he cites examples of God's healing during the time of Elijah and Elisha, he points to two Gentiles - the widow of Zarephath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian general, who are helped and healed. These are people who are outsiders. This will set the tone for the rest of Luke's gospel, which is written to a group of largely Gentile Christians. Listen now for God's word to us in the gospel of Luke. *Read Luke here.*

Everything was humming along just fine. Jesus, the hometown boy made good, had been handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and had proceeded to read it flawlessly, I'm sure. The old men were nodding their heads with approval, the women from their seats in the back were whispering to each other about how well-spoken this young man was. This was Joseph and Mary's son. They had watched him grow up, perhaps seen him take up the tools of a carpenter to follow in his father Joseph's footsteps. He was one of their own.

Though Jesus was by no means at that point in his life a youth, the story has a bit of a Youth Sunday feel to it. Whether they are serving as preachers and worship leaders on Youth Sunday in March, or as worship leaders at some other point during the year, or (as in today's case) as liturgical dancers, it is so good to see our young people using their gifts. We marvel at what good speakers they are, the insights they share, their poise. "Isn't that Doug and Mary's son, or John and Gail's daughter, or Whit and Rebecca's child?" we think to ourselves. "They must be so proud." And maybe we congratulate the parents and pat the children on the back for a job well done.

The story of Jesus' sermon in Nazareth starts out just that way. It's all good. Everyone is amazed at the gracious words that come out of Jesus' mouth. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the Year of the Lord's favor."* Then when Jesus sits down to teach (that's what they did, they stood up to read and sat down to do their teaching), he begins by saying, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* "And all spoke well of him."

That is when things take a turn for the worse, because rather than just saying that the scripture has been fulfilled, and leaving it at that, Jesus goes on to say what fulfilling that scripture will look like. He just can't leave well enough alone. He has to go on to make the connection between what he's said about the Spirit being upon him and what that Spirit will lead him to do. And his words have implications for all who would seek to be led by his Spirit.

There is a great story about the little country church somewhere in the South. The pastor is preaching along in the great hellfire and brimstone tradition and he's condemning all sorts of behaviors as sinful. "Men, if you want to be right with God, you are going to have to quit smoking cigars." Everybody yells *Amen*. "You are going to have to stop smoking cigarettes." Again, everybody shouts *Amen*. "You are going to have to stop running around with women." *Amen*. You are going to have to give up that demon whiskey! Again, the *Amens* ring out. Then he says, "And you are going to have to give up dipping snuff." The sanctuary gets very quiet, and a little old lady with teeth stained yellow and a snuff can in her hand stands up and says, "Well, Preacher, now you've done it. You've quit preaching and done gone to meddling."

To attempt to make connections between what scripture says and how we live, especially if they are uncomfortable connections, is often perceived as leaving preaching behind and going to meddling. I remember being in the middle of a sermon series on the Beatitudes one summer in the church I served in North Carolina. The General Assembly had just been held in Charlotte, and had passed a resolution advocating that Presbyterian Church U.S.A. members and friends should be encouraged to take part in the gun buy back programs sponsored by police stations, and encouraged to work for gun control legislation.

Well, I like to weave in current events in my sermons, and after all, I was preaching on “Blessed are the meek,” so I thought to myself, “I’ll just mention this.”

I did it very carefully, suggesting that people of good faith could differ on that particular issue, and I was certain not everyone would agree with the G.A.’s stance, nor did they have to, but when we think about a passage like “Blessed are the meek,” it ought to make us ponder how much our society seems plagued by gun violence. That was the morning I found out how many members of the congregation were members of the National Rifle Association. As soon as I mentioned the topic, arms began to fold, scowls formed on people’s faces, and I learned the truth of what a colleague of mine has written: “The sermon can be just the beginning of the conversation.” Well, I had a lot of conversations that week, and a lot of pastoral opportunities. And not too long afterward I found a cartoon portraying a pastor behind a pulpit riddled with bullet holes. The caption read, “Reverend Smith decided that this would be his last sermon on gun control.”

I share this not to begin to address the particular issue of gun control (It is a complex one, and there are too many of you who have had to carry weapons in the military or in law enforcement, and too many who are strong advocates for the right to bear arms - whether or not you are in a militia - for me to pretend there is one easy answer to it. Over the centuries, Christian theologians have dealt with the topic of violence and whether or not we should engage in it and under what circumstances. They have grappled with whether or not Christians should use weapons and engage in military action. They have come to different understandings, as Bruce Douglass shared with us in his class a few weeks ago.

But this is not a sermon about gun control. It is a sermon about how the word of God ought to meddle with us. It is a sermon about how if scripture is doing its job, and preachers are doing their job, and if Sunday school teachers are doing their job, we are going to find ourselves meddled with. If scripture never gets into our kitchen, if we never feel challenged by it, if it never steps on our toes, if it never makes us stand up and take notice, then it has really lost much of its power.

At the Reformed Institute Convocation yesterday morning we had an opportunity to hear from Christian Smith, who is the foremost sociologist of religion in America today. He has conducted this giant study on the spiritual lives of American teens and emerging adults.<sup>i</sup> He’s followed this population of more than 3,000 young people (starting when they were between thirteen and seventeen), over the course of the past seven or eight years. They are a representative sample from across the U.S. - making up a variety of religions and attitudes toward religion.

One of the learning’s he has gleaned from the study is that teens who are highly intentional about practicing their faith as young teens (and who do this in the context of a community of faith) by and large remain very highly committed and intentional as they become young adults. There is also a very strong correlation between how committed parents are and how committed their children will be. Now it is not one hundred percent predictive, he says. It doesn’t always happen, of course. You can be very intentional about practicing your faith in worship and talking about it in the home and engaging in service and this might not catch on with your kids. You can not be practicing, not be coming to worship, not be engaging in service, and your kids may be very intentional about practicing their faith. But the probability increases that your child will have a serious faith as a teen and young adult the more you take your practice of faith seriously and expect them to do the same.

He “got in our kitchen” a little bit. And everyone was thinking, “Oh no, this is terrible,” because he was giving us statistics about how many young people in the mainline church sort of disappear after confirmation and we never see them much again (although Dr. Smith told us there is hope because the young people in the study haven’t reached age twenty-nine yet, and they may all wander back at that time).

So Dr. Rick Osmer from Princeton Seminary got up (he was the next presenter) and he dealt with the topic of how we address this problem, how do we make sure this doesn't happen. He told us one of the things we have to do is to really work on community. We have to make sure that kids feel they are a part of a community. He talked about the importance of mentoring (I thought, that's great, we're doing some mentoring here - we are addressing the problem to some extent). He gave some more solutions and prescriptions and he sat down.

Then we moved to a Q and A session, and somebody asked Christian Smith, "Well, what would you do? How can we address this problem of teens and young adults drifting away from the church?" Then Dr. Smith said, "I'll tell you what you can do. You can start with this tomorrow." I thought to myself, "He's about to get into my kitchen." Dr. Smith told us, "One way to address this problem is to make the congregation a high expectation place and" (this is where he got me), "you can start by saying to everyone, 'It is our expectation that you will give ten to fifteen percent of your income for causes outside of yourself. It is our expectation that you will tithe.'" And I thought, "Wow! I can't say that. That's quitting preaching and going to meddling." He's a lay person after all. It comes a lot better from a lay person. The congregation doesn't think, "Well, the pastor is up there trying to raise his or her salary."

This is not a sermon about tithing either. It is a sermon about how scripture can meddle with us. What Jesus does in Nazareth is that he takes scripture and he uses it to meddle with, to challenge the people in his hometown congregation. That's what gets them up in arms. He says, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the prisoner*", and that is all fine. But then he says, in essence, "This is not just for our little in-group. It is not just for the people like us. Just look at what Elijah did for the widow at Zarephath and what Elisha did for Naaman the Syrian." Jesus gets in their kitchen. He challenges them.

Let me tell one more story. I think Gene Methvin might know who I am talking about when I mention the name of Grace Thomas. I ran across the story of Grace Thomas in a book that Tom Long wrote.

Grace was a Baptist. She spent a lot of time in Atlanta, Georgia.

*"Grace was the daughter of a Birmingham, Alabama streetcar conductor and his wife. When she married in the late 1930's, she moved to Atlanta and took a clerking job in one of the state government offices. Through her work, she developed an interest in law and politics, and she enrolled in a local law school that offered night classes.*

*After years of part-time study, she finally completed law school, and her family wondered what she would do with her law degree. They were shocked when Grace announced that she had decided to enter the 1954 election race for governor of Georgia. There were nine candidates for governor that year, eight men and Grace, but there was really only one issue. In the famous Brown vs. Board of Education case earlier that year, the Supreme Court had declared racially "separate but equal" school unconstitutional and thus paved the way for the integration of the public schools. Eight of the gubernatorial candidates spoke out angrily against the court's decision. Only Grace said that she thought that the decision was fair and just and ought to be welcomed by the citizenry. Her campaign slogan was 'Say Grace at the Polls.' Not many did; she ran dead last, and her family was relieved that she had gotten this out of her system.*

*But she had not. Eight years later, in 1962, she ran for governor again. By then, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, and her message of racial harmony was hotly controversial. She received death threats, and her family traveled with her as she campaigned, in order to provide protection and moral support. She finished last again on Election Day, but her campaign was a testimony to goodwill and racial tolerance.*

*One day Grace made a campaign appearance in the small town of Louisville, Georgia. In those days, the centerpiece of the town square in Louisville was not a courthouse or a war memorial but an old slave market, a tragic and evil place where human beings had once been bought and sold. Grace chose the slave market as the site for her campaign speech, and as she stood on the very spot where slaves had been auctioned, a hostile crowd of storekeepers and farmers gathered to hear what she would say. "The old has passed away," she began, "and the new has come. This place," she said, gesturing to the market, "represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, a day when Georgians black and white can join hands to work together."*

*This was provocative talk in the Georgia of 1962, and the crowd stirred. "Are you a communist?" someone shouted at her. Grace paused in midsentence. "No," she said softly, "I am not." "Well, then," continued the heckler, "where'd you get those darned ideas?" Grace thought for a minute, and then she pointed to the steeple of a nearby church. "I got them over there," she said, "in Sunday school."<sup>ii</sup>*

If we don't have a scripture and a God that sometimes meddles with us, we are in sad shape indeed. So, there may be some times when the scripture or the preacher or the Sunday School teacher steps on your toes. I think that's a good thing. It's a holy thing. It's what Jesus was all about.

In his name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>i</sup> See Christian Smith's books *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) - coauthored by Melinda Lundquist Denton - and *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) - coauthored by Patricia Snell.

<sup>ii</sup> Tom Long shared this extended story in his book *Preaching From Memory To Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2009). The story, which he himself quotes from another source, is found on pages 19 and 20.