

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Don’t Waste a Breath”

Rev. Joanne Blair

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Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 4:14-21

Last week John read from the book of Luke about when Jesus was 12 and engaged in conversation in the temple. How he was obedient and grew in wisdom. We now join Jesus when he is 30 years old. Jesus has been baptized, filled with the power of the Spirit, gone off into the wilderness for 40 days, experienced temptation from the devil, and is now back out of the wilderness. Our scripture reading this morning is, in the book of Luke, the beginning of Jesus’s Galilean Ministry.

We all love it when someone from our hometown “makes good” and becomes well-known for it. Jesus had been teaching in the surrounding areas and now he’s home.

“Hasn’t he grown into a fine young man?!”

“Oh, he’s so articulate and confident!”

“Doesn’t he look good? That wilderness air has done him well!”

“And he’s single, too....”

People were excited to hear him speak...at first.

Those of you following “We Make the Road by Walking” also know that the reading assignment for this week goes on for several more verses, and Jesus makes it clear that his message is for “outsiders” also. And after he said that, they wanted to throw him off of a cliff.

Hopefully you won’t feel that way about me today!

Today, we’re going to focus on the front part of this piece ... the verses we just read. Imagine the scene: People sitting in their favorite “pew”, chatting before worship. “Oh, Jesus is in town! He’s been teaching in other synagogues. I wonder if he’ll teach today? Oops, better settle down ... service is starting.”

The service begins with the usual prayers...and a Psalm...and sure enough, Jesus comes forward to read from the scroll. He finds the passage he wants and reads the particular verses from Isaiah that I just read. It was the custom in that time to stand when reading the scripture, and then sit down to teach. And so Jesus sits down and people anxiously await to hear what he will say.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

That’s it. Perhaps the world’s shortest sermon. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (And people say my sermons are short!)

Jesus would have flunked any seminary preaching class. His sermon was too short, had no jokes or

illustrations, and didn't go on to explain his point. But Jesus obviously thought it was enough. That's why he chose this messianic passage from Isaiah. And all these many centuries later, his message is the same: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Only nine words ... nine words that changed everything.

This Friday, January 20, Donald Trump will become the 45th president of the United States. After taking the oath of office, he will give his "inaugural address", which is a speech given to inform the people of his intentions as a leader. The scripture and statement we just heard from Jesus, is his agenda. It is an outline of his ministry, a statement of his vision, and the foundation of his mission. This was Jesus' inaugural address.

This is why the writer of Luke places the story much earlier in his gospel than the other writers do. Through 30 years of preparation, Jesus is clear about who he is, and why he is here. Jesus speaks of how society is to be changed - how people need to transform to become a kinder and gentler society. His message was for the people of the day. And his message is for us, today.

Earlier we heard Ann/Forrest read from the book of Isaiah. Note that when Jesus read from Isaiah he left out all talk of vengeance - and spoke only of release, recovery, freedom, and good news. Jesus was speaking to everyone that could hear him, and he is speaking to all of us... for we are all captive, broken, and blind in some way. Jesus is claiming all of us to be transformed ... and to take part in that transformation. Today. Today.

Some of us live in the past. We long for the "simpler days of old" ... for "the way things used to be." Some of us can't move ahead from circumstances or relationships in the past (both good and bad) ... and we get stuck there. Some of us strive to exist in the future. "Someday, things will be better." or "I'm waiting for X to happen, and then I'll do Y."

As Michael Marsh says: "With one foot in the past and one in the future we straddle and completely miss the present. We become captive to what was, oppressed by what might be, and blind to what is."

I agree, for while we are shaped by the past, and plan for the future, we live in today. Today.

Today is where we meet Jesus. Today, in the present moment, regardless of our personal circumstances. Jesus calls for the restoration of this world. Jesus calls for the transformation of our lives. And Jesus calls for these things now. Today.

And if we call ourselves followers of Jesus, then we gladly and gratefully take on this yoke. I used to think of a yoke as a heavy burden. (Even though Jesus says it isn't.) This pastor's stole is a yoke.

Many people in Jesus day were disappointed in this Messiah. They wanted him for themselves, and they wanted him to charge in on a white horse with trumpets and power. And if we are honest, we are often the same. We want Jesus to "take care of business", to answer our prayers ... to fix things. But Jesus

shows us by his life and death and resurrection that he is not just “a fixer” ... he is the Way.

Jesus calls on each of us to invest ourselves in the Kingdom of God. Today.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. The Spirit of the Lord is within us. And so we are all called. And no matter how inadequate you and I may feel at times, we are the body of Christ. We are the hands and feet of Christ, and we are each called to ministry.

In a world of so much change and turmoil, where natural and man-made disasters seem rampant, where there is so much need, where we sometimes struggle to see God at work ... this can seem totally daunting. Where do we begin? Here. Today. Now.

How do we do it? With kindness, and compassion.
Let every thought and action be directed by the love of God.
Each of us has a call and a role to play.

Jesus had the power of the Spirit, and we do, too.
We are called, because the Spirit is around us, beside us, and within us.
Respond to the Spirit in you, and the Spirit in each other.

Every breath we take is a sign that we are alive today.
Every breath we take is a gift.
Every breath we take is a call to action.
And the Spirit is there to guide and direct us in that breath.
Today, don't waste a breath.

Amen.