



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Jesus' First Sermon

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 27, 2013*

*The Third Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on Luke 4:14-21*

Just this past April, I led a trip to the Holy Land, and one of our stops was Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. Today it is a mostly Arab-Israeli city of 80,000. In Jesus' time, it would have been a Jewish village of about seventy. Our group stayed at a convent of French-speaking sisters. And from there we explored the center of the city, where we could visit special sites of veneration like Joseph's carpentry shop and the site of the Annunciation, where Mary heard the cataclysmic news from God of her impending pregnancy. Both of these sites were below street level, having been excavated by the Franciscans.

In our reading today, Jesus visits his synagogue there. There is a small stone room that you can visit that is said to be the synagogue where Jesus and his family worshiped, but it is on street level and was built by Crusaders in the 12th century. The remnants of the tiny synagogue are likely deep underneath. But there is one site of repute from Jesus' time in Nazareth that you don't have to dig to find. And it was on the bus ride out of Nazareth that our guide pointed it out to us. It didn't look special. It was a continuous sprawl of apartment buildings that had a marked difference in topography, such that the roofs of some buildings were level with the foundations of their neighbors. These buildings occupied the cliff off which Jesus was nearly thrown two thousand years ago.

It wasn't until I had seen the cliff with my own eyes that the weight of that incident really sank in with me. We don't talk about it this much in the church. I have never seen a painting, stained glass, or film that depicts this scene: the time that Jesus' own hometown tried to kill him. If you read the Gospels in light of this, you will find that this is a dynamic that Jesus had to deal with for his entire ministry: sending disciples two by two into villages ahead of him, in part to see if he would be safe. There were unnamed masses that conspired to have him killed. And then the most powerful people in the land were after his neck: Herod the Client King when he was a baby, Caiaphas the High Priest and Pilate the Prefect of the Roman Empire when he was grown. But as strong as they may be, these are strangers. I shudder to think about how much of an impression it made upon Jesus that at the very beginning of his ministry the people who lived with him, watched him grow—probably even a number of his cousins—people who knew him so well, were so enraged, so red in the face with anger by what Jesus was up to in the world, that they, even they, tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. Even though he escapes, he is an exile. Jesus never returns to his hometown in Luke's Gospel. What a heavy loss it must have been for him.

What was it that angered the people of Nazareth? Why would they do such a thing? Well, Jesus is nearly lynched because of his first sermon. We heard the first part of this first sermon for our Gospel reading today; we will hear the rest of it next week. It is appropriate that this first sermon is part of the season of Epiphany, because it reveals so much about the true character of God. But it is an Epiphany of God that few in Nazareth can bear to accept.

This sermon is set in the synagogue of Nazareth. Jesus had returned from his travels abroad. A great deal had happened to him. He had recently been baptized and the Spirit of God had blessed the event. The Spirit led Jesus into the desert wilderness for forty days and there the temptations of the Devil were defeated. He had made his way back to Nazareth, teaching along the way, throughout Galilee. And his reputation was out of sight. And so, proud to welcome back a young man who had made a name for himself, they gave him the task during the service to read from the Scriptures. He read from the scroll of Isaiah, a part of the prophecy that everyone would have known by heart, and a part that goes to the heart of his people's hopes and yearnings. It was a passage that was especially read to announce the Year of Jubilee; it expressed the hope of Israel for liberation from the bondage of their personal spiritual dis-ease, but also liberation from the yoke of political and economic oppression under Rome and all of their enemies. It is a cry of hope from the underside of history.

Let me read this passage to you as Jesus' people would have known it:

"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  
and the day of the vengeance of our God."

Now Jesus does something that is extraordinary—that you wouldn't know if you didn't know the passage by heart. He omits the best part. Or at least the best part for so many of the people. Instead of the real ending, Jesus cuts off the reading before the juiciest part of the Jubilee year can happen, the day of the vengeance of our God: the Hollywood ending with battles and explosions where the good, downtrodden, oppressed people, God's people, get their revenge against their enemies. Instead, Jesus stops short, ending the famous reading to proclaim that the Christ, the anointed one, has come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, full-stop. Mid-thought he shuts the scroll, sits down, and says, shortly and sweetly, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Many interpreters of this sermon have said that people are so upset by this because Jesus implies that he is special, that he has been anointed by the Spirit, implying that He is the Christ—that this is what enrages Nazareth. I don't think so. They don't seek to lynch Jesus because he was uppity. It would have been spectacular news for them that a possible Messiah/Celebrity had the potential to come from their little village. This isn't the problem. And some interpreters say that they are upset that he takes the cause of the poor and downtrodden. This isn't the problem, because the people of Nazareth as an occupied people would identify with the brokenhearted and poor. The problem is that Jesus takes the wind out of their desire for vengeance against their enemies, even as legitimate victims. In popular opinion, part of the promise of the Jubilee, the full presence of God, was that Israel, imprisoned and blinded and made poor by evil doers, would be delivered from her oppressors, and also that the oppressors would be punished, and punished with extreme prejudice. But Jesus doesn't continue this aspect of the tradition.

Again and again, Jesus takes from the Scriptures what works, and leaves aside, respectfully and tactfully, what does not. And his first sermon is no different. Jesus, full of the Spirit, proclaims from the heart of the sacred liturgy, from the heart of his Scriptures, that God's setting things right again is already happening. The vengeance is unnecessary. The coming of God in God's fullness, through the Jubilee, through the anointed one, the Christ, in all our daily lives, all this is happening, and not only is it happening through Israel, but it is also happening through Israel's enemies. He goes on to cite Scriptures where God worked through someone from Sidon and someone else from Syria, the very places where the foreign and the damned are. Jesus cites how God worked through the people that God was supposed to be hating, at least in popular piety. Popular piety is brutal. Even the Magi who come from the East to give gifts to baby Jesus, these foreigners would, according to popular piety, deserve the wrath of God. But the Gospels undermine popular piety, stretching theological imagination, proclaiming these visitors to be heirs to the promises of God, too.

Jesus innovates by proclaiming a Jubilee, a Restoration from God, that doesn't involve wrath for the foreigner, the enemy, the oppressor. Jesus' first sermon could be summarized like so: "My people, the Jubilee is here. Not only for you, but also for those you hate. In fact, God also goes to your oppressors with this message of Jubilee, deliverance, and salvation." These are indeed gracious words. Far more gracious than people could bear. And so Jesus was nearly lynched and, ultimately, banished.

The cost of proclaiming the grace of God in its fullness is dangerous even now. It is not only the Nazarenes who can't stand the thought that God is interested in their enemies' welfare. We, too, have our desire for vengeance against our enemies. And this vengeance can disguise itself as fairness and work to inspire our personal lives, our halls of justice, and our foreign policy with its dark energy. It is as if we are overcome by a feverish hallucination where we think that we can subtract from the world's pain by meting out more of it, that we can repair the world by destroying part of it. We fool ourselves into trusting that we can overcome the monstrous by becoming monstrous ourselves.

But, as it was proclaimed in Jesus' first sermon, vengeance has no place in God's desires. God's stance, as we see it in Jesus, is not "An eye for an eye," but "Go, and sin no more." God is beyond the waste of vengeance. And our task is to free ourselves from its seductive promise of satisfaction, when so much of the world finds solace there. Even now, there are voices within your heart, and voices of great power in our world, that proclaim that vengeance is the only response to our enemies, whether personal enemies, ideological, or national ones. But these voices are the same voices that nearly threw our Lord off a cliff in Nazareth, and these same voices ultimately crucified Him outside the walls of the Holy City.

If we are to walk in the way of the Spirit, the voice we follow, the same voice proclaimed in the synagogue in Nazareth long ago, this voice leads us on a way of grace promised to every soul on this earth, a way that leads us, not by the Spirit of the Vengeful Accuser, but by the Spirit of the Generous Advocate, the Spirit that gives us hope and integrity to be, come hell or high-water, the people that God made us to be: Beloved and loving children of God, children who are not only recipients, but also bearers, of God's grace, grace for all—undeserved as it may be, but given all the same. May that Spirit find a place in our hearts and in our lives.

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