

**Jon Hauerwas – January 27, 2019 – “Jesus’ First Sermon”  
Psalm 19:7-10, 14 and Luke 4:14-21**

When I was in seminary and living in New Jersey, my parents drove up from South Carolina for a visit. As a part of their stay, we decided that we would travel by train from Princeton to New York City – it only takes about an hour – and stay overnight in Manhattan. I had long been a fan of David Letterman’s comedy, and as we prepared for the trip, I was interested in attending a live taping of the show. I asked my dad if he would be willing to go with me if I was able to obtain some tickets. And when he agreed, I made a call to the show.

The man who answered my call was courteous, but he also cut straight to the chase, asking, “how many times per week do you watch the Late Show? You can answer 1 – 5.” “Well,” I thought, “this is going nowhere.” In truth, I tuned in once every few weeks, if that. So I answered with the lowest number possible and waited for my rejection.

It’s easy for me to imagine how often that guy gets lied to by callers who hope to impress him by boasting of a super fan status that simply isn’t true. “Oh, I tune in every night, four or five times per week” must be a common refrain. So I was

shocked when, despite my honesty, I received some good news. “Okay. A once a week. That means that I will ask you the easiest of our five questions.”

When he said this, I had the same feeling that one experiences when exiting a ski lift and looking with anticipation at the journey that awaits. “Are you ready?” he asked. “Yes,” I responded. “Okay. There is a man named Rupert whose store is often featured on Dave’s show. What is the name of Rupert’s store?” I was shocked to the know the answer and immediately said, “The Hello Deli.” Within a few hours, my father and I were sitting in the Late Show audience.

Sometimes, the truth can set you free. And yet, while we often don’t admit it, the truth can also get you into a lot of trouble. Just take the example of Jesus, a man who was a faithful Jew and a respected adult member of his hometown synagogue. Already a popular figure, he was “invited to read Scripture and offer comment” in keeping with tradition. He unrolls the scroll, finds his intended text, and reads from Isaiah, chapter 61, verses 1-2.<sup>1</sup>

To Jewish ears, this passage sounds like a clear reference to the year of jubilee, a celebration outlined in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In short, the jubilee was

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. Joel B. Green, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 206.

a fiftieth-year response to seven cycles of seven years. On the fiftieth year, debts were to be forgiven, slaves were to be freed, and the land was to be given rest so that a new era could begin.<sup>2</sup>

Following his brief reading, “Jesus neatly rolls up the scroll,” looks at the gathered worshipers, and says only nine words comprising his entire first sermon. “Today,” he tells them, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”<sup>3</sup> What was he talking about?

Well, as you may know, Jesus lived in a world that was hurting badly. 70-90 percent of inhabitants of the Roman Empire could be “classified as ‘poor’ to varying degrees, struggling either permanently or sporadically with food insecurity and subsistence existence.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus’ reading from Isaiah serves as his inaugural address, foretelling his mission of healing, liberation, and grace.<sup>5</sup> With a one sentence response he proclaims God’s desire to “heal the damage inflicted on the poor by Rome’s imperial rule through limited resources, poor nutrition, low immunity, and abundant

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

stressors,”<sup>6</sup> and he insists that “now is always the time to release the captives, to give sight to the blind, to free the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>7</sup>

And how did the people respond? Well, we hear that the congregation was filled with “murderous rage” as they rose up with one accord and attempted to throw him off a cliff.<sup>8</sup> Jesus, it seems, “really rattled the cages of the faithful.”<sup>9</sup> And he did so by claiming to be the embodiment of God’s jubilee. “I,” he says, “am anointed to do these things – to serve as the fulfillment of the law.”

Most of us have a tenuous relationship with the truth. To follow Jesus is to come face to face with our untruthfulness - certainly a jarring recognition. Jesus’ forerunner and cousin, John the Baptist, told us that truth and light were coming, even while there is something in us that loves the dark and hates the truth. He told us to repent, reminding all in earshot that while the truth may set us free, it also has the ability to make us mad as hell.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 111, 113.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

And so it was for those who sought to hurl him off of a cliff, for those who pushed him out of their towns, and for those who handed him over to be crucified. We're often hoping that God will ask us the easiest question imaginable. A one out of five. Something that's already in our comfort zone so that we can revel in our cleverness and be welcomed with open arms. But, it won't take long to recognize that our knowledge is limited and that we will need some help along the way. And so, Jesus preached. And he asked that we might follow. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.