

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 Mark 1:14-20 January 24, 2021
The Ordination and Installation of Ruling Elders
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

JESUS' INAUGURAL ELEVATOR SPEECH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

President Biden's inauguration as our 46th president was unusual, what with the coronavirus pandemic, the heightened security around the Capitol, and the fears of more unrest and violence. One thing that didn't change, however, was the new president delivering his inaugural address. According to the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Activities and the White House Historical Association, "most Presidents use their Inaugural address to present their vision of America and to set forth their goals for the nation. . . Inaugural speeches set the tone for the incoming administration. Sometimes they are intended to persuade . . . or to heal and reconcile. Some presidents have spoken directly to the nation's concerns." The White House Historical Association notes, "Usually bipartisan and unifying, the inaugural address gives the president a first 'center stage' opportunity to introduce his vision to the nation and the world."¹

President William Henry Harrison delivered the longest inaugural address on record – almost 8,500 words over an hour and forty-five minutes in a snowstorm. The President developed a cold which turned into pneumonia and he was dead a month later. The three shortest speeches belong to George Washington (his second inaugural, 133 words), Franklin Delano Roosevelt (his fourth inaugural, 557 words), and Abraham Lincoln (his second inaugural, 698 words).

Some of the most memorable lines in U.S. political rhetoric have come from inaugural speeches. In 1801, Thomas Jefferson said, "Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." In 1861, on the brink of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln appealed to the divided nation, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection." Four years later, a month before the end of that terrible conflict, Lincoln said, "With malice toward none, with charity toward all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." On March 4, 1933, in the depths of the Great Depression, FDR rallied the nation with these famous words, "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Twenty-eight years later, JFK inspired a generation by declaring, "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."

Some people have called Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark his "inaugural address." In a sense, they are. They seem intended to persuade people, and they certainly introduce Jesus' vision to whomever heard him say the words, not to mention the people reading Mark's gospel. In the New Revised Standard Version translation, Jesus' inaugural speech is only nineteen words long. In a way, his words are more of an "elevator speech" than a full-blown inaugural address. According to SCORE.org, an "elevator speech" is "a persuasive, concise introduction that provides the listener with a solid idea of a person, a business, a product or a service (or practically anything else) within just a short space of time."²

So, how does Jesus' inaugural elevator speech stack up? Here are the top criteria for an effective elevator speech:

- Make crystal clear what you're selling (The Kingdom of God has come near)
- Make it clear you know what your business is all about (The time is fulfilled)
- Make it clear how your offerings can directly address the needs of the audience (Repent)
- and address the "Why change?" question – why customers should be doing something different (and believe the good news of the gospel)

The rest of Mark's gospel tells how Jesus fleshed out his inaugural elevator speech in his teaching, preaching, healing, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus' inaugural address invited people to join him in a new way of living, shaped by the Kingdom of God.

Following his second inaugural address, President Lincoln was concerned about how it would be received. He thought it was better than many of his other speeches, but someone remarked that it might not be popular. Lincoln agreed, "Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them." At a reception following the speech, Frederick Douglass shook the President's hand and called his speech "a divine effort."

So, how was Jesus' inaugural address received? At the beginning of the gospel, we'd have to say it was received very well by Simon and Andrew and James and John. A successful elevator speech is supposed to take about 30 seconds. When I timed myself reading Mark 1:15 in a conversational tone, it took only 7 seconds. When Jesus made his pitch to Simon and Andrew, he pared it down from nineteen words to ten words, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." (3.5 seconds). When he called James and John, the message was a mere two words, "Follow me." (less than 1 second)

But what a life-changing speech it was for those who heard and followed. Most presidential inaugural speeches don't lay out detailed policies, but cast larger visions. The same is true of Jesus' speech. Instead of making a philosophical argument or laying out a timeline of activities, Jesus offers a gracious invitation, "Follow me." Interestingly, after Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John and the other disciples have been with Jesus for a while and seen what life in the Kingdom of God involves, they find out a bit more about what it means to "Follow me." Using the same language as he did by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34) If Jesus had said

that to those four guys in their boats from the get-go, they might never have followed him!

On this day when we ordain and install three Ruling Elders, it's good to remember what's involved. Our Presbyterian tradition speaks of a three-part call. There is the person's inward call in the heart. There is the outward affirmation by a congregation of that inward call. And there is work to be done. People have often asked, "Why in the world did Simon, Andrew, James, and John immediately leave their nets and boats and follow Jesus?" Well, perhaps God had been working on their hearts and they felt an inward call to something else. Then along came Jesus and extended that outward call that spoke to them and affirmed their inward call. They certainly had work to do – to fish for people and to help proclaim the coming of the Kingdom and good news of God.

We ordain and install Kelli, Greg, and Hayes this morning, who will join the other elders on the session to be our spiritual leaders. While they are called to fulfill specific leadership responsibilities in our congregation, we can't turn all of the ministry over to the nine elders on the session. Jesus extends the invitation to each and every one of us – "Follow me." It's an invitation to obedience, to ministry, to a life-changing and life-shaping experience. As someone has said, the fundamental quality of discipleship is found in that two-word invitation: "Follow me."

In a few minutes, as our elders are ordained and installed, you will be asked, "Do we agree to pray for them, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ who alone is Head of the Church?" As our elders seek to follow the will of God for this congregation, we are all invited to follow them as they guide us and nurture us to be more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, who always says, "Follow me."

In 1906, Albert Schweitzer, theologian, organist, medical doctor, and Nobel Peace Prize winner, published an important book called *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. He wrote, "[Jesus] comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."³

Jesus' inaugural elevator speech, pared down from nineteen words to two, may be the shortest on record. But it's certainly the most important inaugural speech we'll ever hear. How will we respond?

Let us pray: Gracious Christ, you came to the fishermen when the prophet John was taken away. Come to us now, as we fear losses of our own. Grant us courage to cast aside the nets that bind us, to follow you into true freedom and newness of life.

Help us to be faithful disciples, that we might inspire others to follow in your ways. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information is from: “Inaugural Address,” at www.inaugural.senate.gov and “Presidential Inaugurations: The Inaugural Address,” at www.whitehousehistory.org.

²Senko Duras, “The Elevator Pitch: What, Why and How?” August 5, 2019 at www.score.org.

³Cited in Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 48.