

1 Kings 17:1-16; 2 Kings 5:1-14 Luke 4:14-30 January 27, 2019
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FAMOUS FIRST WORDS

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.

At just 701 words, President Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address on March 4, 1865 lasted just six or seven minutes. In fact, many onlookers were still arriving in the mud when Lincoln finished speaking. Delivered a mere month before the end of the Civil War and only forty-one days before his assassination, the unexpected tone and content of the president's speech have gone down in history as some of the most famous first words ever spoken.

On March 4, 1865 and in the days following, President Lincoln's speech received mixed reviews. Some opponents were disappointed that Lincoln didn't speak more harshly against the South. The reporter from the *New York Herald* wrote, "It was not strictly an inaugural address . . . It was more like a valedictory." That same newspaper criticized the president for not laying out specific terms of peace or addressing the urgent problems of the nation. Some critics thought the president's speech was rambling and incoherent.

In his inaugural speech, President Lincoln broke precedent when he criticized the divided nation for the ongoing civil war, and called on citizens North and South to consider their sinfulness and God's judgment. The speech was full of biblical language. In a way, the inaugural address was a call to repentance on both sides. Perhaps the most famous first words of that speech came at the very end:

"With malice toward none, with charity for 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 wound, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Following the address, a reception was held in the White House. Frederick Douglass, the former slave and famous abolitionist, attended. When President Lincoln saw Douglass, he said, "I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my inaugural address. How did you like it?" Douglass answered, "Mr. President, that was a sacred effort."

In an article about this second inaugural address, entitled "Lincoln's Greatest Speech," Garry Wills wrote, "Lincoln expected some to dislike the address, not because they did not understand it but because they understood it too well. In the letter to Thurlow Weed in which [Lincoln] "called it as good as anything he had written," he wrote, "I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford [an occasion] for me to tell it."¹

Jesus' sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth are some famous first words. And, like President Lincoln's second inaugural address, they were not immediately popular. Oh sure, at first "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But when Jesus started telling stories as illustrations for his sermon, he apparently went from preachin' to meddlin' (as they say). And so, the crowd went from "praise to precipice" as they ran Jesus out of his hometown and tried to throw him off the cliff.

Lincoln's own pessimistic evaluation of how his hearers would receive his address is a good description of the hometown folks in the Nazareth synagogue: "[People, *sic.*] are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them." In his famous first words, President Lincoln challenged his hearers to admit their need for repentance, to confess their own complicity in the great troubles in the nation, and to extend sympathy and grace to their enemies. Then, as now, those words are hard to hear, especially when we're convinced of the righteousness of our cause or feeling secure in our position in life.

These words of Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue are not the first words he speaks in the gospel of Luke. As a twelve-year old, he spoke to Joseph and Mary in the temple in Jerusalem. As a thirty-year old, he argued with the devil in the wilderness. But these words in the Nazareth synagogue are the first public words Jesus speaks at the beginning of his ministry. In a sense, this is Jesus' inaugural address in the gospel of Luke and for his ministry.

The keynote or inaugural address sets the tone or theme and lays out the program to come. One article points out "The keynote address or keynote speech is delivered to set the underlying tone and summarize the core message or most important revelation of the event."² In his keynote address on the Sabbath in Nazareth, Jesus was short on specifics, but his sermon was full of challenges and revelation. In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock notes that Jesus' sermon on the verses from Isaiah 61 tells us: who Jesus is, of what Jesus' ministry consists; what his church will be and do; and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church.³

You've heard me quote Mark Twain before, who said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." That seems to be what happened during worship on the Sabbath in the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus' reputation had preceded him from Capernaum. The hometown folks' reasoning must have been, "Well, if he's been doing all of these wonderful things around Galilee, he most certainly will perform miracles here at home, and maybe even commend us for our faith and way of life." Maybe there was even some hometown pride at work at first – "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

But the realization slowly dawned upon them as they listened to Jesus preach and tell them stories they knew by heart – about a widow in Zarephath, a Gentile woman to boot, who received God's mercy and grace, and about a Gentile army commander who was healed of his leprosy by the grace and power of God. At first glance, you might think the good folks in Nazareth were upset by the idea that God's grace, mercy, and love could extend to people other than them, especially people so different from them.

That's part of their problem. But they were also upset because Jesus' offer of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed meant they had to admit that about themselves. Jesus anticipated their rejection of his good news, because he said, "You're probably going to tell me, 'Doctor, cure yourself!'" In other words, don't tell us what's wrong with us! How dare you tell us what's wrong with us! You'd better take care of yourself first! Who do you think you are? And their wondering, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" takes on a whole new meaning – "Who is he to talk to us like this?"

Last week, the current president's press secretary caused a stir among many people when she commented on Martin Luther King, Jr. day, "Today we honor a great American who gave his life to right the wrong of racial inequality." Twitter exploded with comments such as, "He didn't give his life, he was murdered!" One person rephrased her comment to read, "Today we honor a man who was killed for speaking truth to power and encouraging others to believe in a better and more equal world."

That tweet describes the ultimate fate of Jesus as a result of his preaching and his ministry. Here at the beginning of the gospel, Luke points us ahead to what awaits Jesus when he finally arrives in Jerusalem. In the short space of eight verses, the crowd goes from speaking well of him and being amazed at the gracious words he spoke, to driving him out of the town to the brow of the hill, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

There's no record in the gospel that Jesus ever returned to his hometown of Nazareth. Surely he was correct when he told them that day, "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." (Luke 4:24) Jesus escaped the mob's action that Sabbath day, as he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Ironically, as has been pointed out, Jesus does not go elsewhere because he is rejected at Nazareth, he is rejected at Nazareth because he goes somewhere else – namely to the Gentiles, and therefore to all people, preaching and demonstrating God's love, mercy, grace, power, good news, release, recovery of sight, and freedom. Translating that into today's world is not hard to understand, but it surely is hard to accept sometimes, isn't it?

As a preacher of the gospel, but also as one who hears the gospel message, I need to listen carefully to what Jesus preached that Sabbath day. Some of Jesus' words in the gospels are referred to as "the hard sayings of Jesus." They are called that, not because they're hard to understand, but because they're hard to hear and take in. Are we going to welcome and accept the gospel words that comfort us and support us, but reject the gospel message that calls us to account and challenges our strongly held beliefs? Are we going to welcome the new thing God is doing today, or are we going to reject the message that calls us to a new way of life? St. Augustine once wrote, "If you believe what you like in the gospels, and reject what you don't like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself."

In an article she wrote about Jesus' Nazareth sermon, Diana Butler Bass makes the claim that " 'Today' is the most radical thing Jesus ever said," as in "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." She observes, "But 'today' is a deeply

dangerous spiritual reality – because today insists that we lay aside both our memories and our dreams to embrace fully the moment of now. The past romanticizes the work of our ancestors; the future scans the horizons of our descendants and depends upon them to fix everything. But ‘today’ places us in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God’s desire for the world. . . Living in God’s promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about NOW. This is a hard truth to hear and receive. Jesus’ friends refused. They would rather stay mired in nostalgia and complain about the future. How great the prophets were! If only a savior would appear and get us out of this mess! But Jesus’ sermon remains as clear and poignant and important and urgent as ever: *Today* this promise has been fulfilled in your hearing – what we need is here. Today.”⁴

Famous first words of Jesus. The question is, “What will we say in response?” Actually, the better question is, “What will we do in response?”

As our Lord himself said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Let us pray: Lord, you bring glad tidings to the poor. Let us hear. You heal the brokenhearted. Heal us too. You free the prisoners from their jails. Free us from ourselves. Loving God, please come to us, and send us out, forgiven, to the poor, the brokenhearted the imprisoned. Amen.

NOTES

¹Garry Wills, “Lincoln’s Greatest Speech,” The Atlantic (September 1999) at www.theatlantic.com.

² “Keynote,” at www.en.wikipedia.org.

³Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990).

⁴Dr. Diana Butler Bass, “The Power of Today,” January 24, 2016 at www.day1.org.