

## Sermon for Sunday, January 27, 2013 Luke 4:14-21 "The Nine Word Inaugural Speech"

I have inaugurations on the brain, given that we had the second inaugural of the president this past week. Inaugurations are marked by festivities, solemn words, and, of course, inaugural speeches. Some of those speeches are flights of brilliance – Lincoln's Second Inaugural, for example, which includes the phrase: "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 wounds." Most are less memorable.

Some are short, as Lincoln's was at less than 500 words. Some are not.

On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1841 President William Henry Harrison delivered the longest inaugural speech on record – a whopping one hour and 45 minutes. It was a cold and miserable day, and Harrison wore no overcoat. He laid out grand plans in that stem-winder of a speech, an affirmation of the political philosophy of the Whig party, calling for changes that would greatly limit the power of government and the president. Only one piece of the broad agenda of that speech actually got fulfilled in Harrison's presidency. His powers as president were greatly reduced, since he caught a cold that day, which later turned into pneumonia, claiming his life just a month into his presidency.

But before we say that he deserved it, making people have to stand in the cold listening to his words for so long, we should remember that death claims the concise as well as the verbose. We remember that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated one month into his second term, after delivering that exquisitely wrought brief address.

Things like inaugural speeches are good reminders to students of history that, as the poet Robert Burns wrote, "the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley." It's a fact...we make grand statements of what we are going to do, and then, in big ways and small, the plans don't fully come to fruition.

When I hear Jesus in today's gospel, I think of those inaugural speeches, the promises contained within them, and how history often got in the way of the promises.

I say this, because this gospel passage was, in essence, Jesus' inaugural speech. You know the story. Jesus came home to his hometown after an initial launch of his ministry in other places. It was a launch that was well-received, Luke tells us. It was the custom in those days that when itinerant rabbis came through town, they would be invited to read God's Word in the synagogue and teach on the reading. So here came this hometown boy, Joseph and Mary's son from down the road, who was all the buzz because of his teaching, back home again. Of course they would give him the courtesy of asking him to read the Scripture. Of course they would expect him to interpret it, to teach its meaning. Didn't they all want to hear what Jesus would say, this man whom they had known for thirty years? So they handed him the scroll, and it was unfurled to a reading from the prophet Isaiah. It was a prediction of the Anointed One, the hoped-for Messiah who would redeem God's oppressed people:

"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."

The crowd in that small synagogue held its collective breath. What brilliant words of explanation would Jesus offer? What wise interpretation? How much teaching would he do on this passage, since all the famous rabbis were famous precisely because they could talk endlessly on the smallest word in a text?

Jesus looked up from the scroll as he rolled it back up and handed it to the attendant. He looked around, feeling every eye on him, waiting. And then he said "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Nine words. Nothing else. He was done. He sat down. I imagine after ninety seconds of shocked silence – they could not believe that this was all he had to say – it dawned on them what he had actually said in those nine words, the shortest inaugural speech ever. He said the Messiah was here...and the implication was that he was it.

It wouldn't surprise me that the room exploded into an uproar in that moment – what was he saying? Was he saying what I think he was saying? Who does he think he is? Blasphemy! Is it really true? WoW!

And look at what he was promising: good news to the poor, who probably didn't get much good news ever; release to the captives – potent words where the Romans took plenty of captives for all sorts of ridiculous reasons; sight to the blind – healing of all sorts, whether it was literal healing of illness and infirmity or the more subtle opening of the eyes and hearts of those who couldn't see what was going on around them; relief for the oppressed; and the year of the Lord's favor – a jubilee, when debts would be forgiven, when all of society gave each other a fresh start.

Talk about setting yourself up in an inaugural speech for a later check-in by Politi-Fact to see how many of those promises would be delivered!

So let's imagine that Politi-Fact is on the case. Let's fast forward to three years later. Jesus is dead, crucified by the Romans. Are the poor still poor? Yup. Are the oppressed still oppressed? Yup. Are the blind – both the visually impaired and those whose souls are blind to the needs of others – still blind. Yup.

PolitiFact would not be impressed, because if you measure Jesus' bold speech by the yardstick of the world, it just doesn't measure up.

But let's look at it another way. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or

beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.”

Niebuhr wasn't necessarily talking about Jesus's promises on that morning in Galilee, but I think the thought applies here. Let's take it as a given that no one ever accomplishes everything they set out to do. Not presidents, who document their goals in inaugural speeches. Not corporate executives, who attest to their companies' goals in annual reports. Not mothers and fathers, who share their aspirations for their children. It never turns out exactly how you plan, because stuff happens that changes the situation.

And maybe that's something that Jesus experiences. He reads that passage from Isaiah, knows what his mission on earth is – to do exactly what Isaiah promised – and says, okay. That's my plan. What he doesn't say is when it will get done.

If you're sitting in that dusty Galilee synagogue listening to Jesus' nine words, you're going to jump to the conclusion that Jesus is not only saying he is the Messiah, you're going to think, “He's going to do all that stuff right now. He's going to get us out from under the yoke of the Roman Empire. He's going to bring us heaven on earth.”

But he doesn't say that. He never says that he's going to snap his fingers and make it all happen. He never says it's happening by Friday afternoon. He simply says that it is going to happen, and he is going to be the change agent.

And here is why that quote from Niebuhr is so appropriate: It doesn't all get done in Jesus' human lifetime. It is merely started by his unbelievably generous gift of himself to redeem us from our sins. We are going to get to what Isaiah prophesied, but it will happen in God's time, which is very different from political time, or parenting time, or fiscal years.

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Jesus, in his life and in his death, gives us hope. We cannot define hope only in our time and place – it is across the arc of history that it will occur, in ways that we cannot imagine. When Lincoln wrote that second inaugural in the wake of a horrific war, as the nation sought to heal and as he sought to enforce the end of human slavery in the United States, he might not have imagined Doctor Martin Luther King Jr's efforts to make all people of color truly equal citizens. He might not have imagined a Thurgood Marshall as a Supreme Court Justice. He might not have pictured Condoleezza Rice as Secretary of State. Abraham Lincoln, that 16<sup>th</sup> president, might not have thought that it would ever happen that his successor, the 44<sup>th</sup> President would be an African-American.

God's time is not our time, and work started in one place might need time, and all of us, to carry out God's plans. But for that to work, we need to share hope that God's plans are possible, and we need to share the faith that God is with us, behind us and before us in the task.

We have to recognize that we must bind ourselves together in shared love for God and for each other. Jesus knew this. He equipped his disciples to share the continuing work he began. He knew, despite what might seem like bravado in that nine word inaugural speech, that he would not deliver on all his promises in a few years. And for that to happen, the twelve, and all of us who followed them, needed, and continue to need to love.

Time is not the enemy of doing good. It gives us the space to get the work done together. And the work is shared because the love is shared because the hope is shared.

Jesus started our journey to the fulfillment of those promises from Isaiah with nine words. He gave his life to ensure that those promises were even possible. What will you give to help make them happen?

Amen.