

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 23, 2022 (Epiphany 3C)**

One of my preaching mantras is, “Nobody every complained about a sermon being too *short*.” But, wow, does Jesus take this to heart. This morning, we hear him stand up, read two sentences from the prophet Isaiah, and then preach an eight-word sermon. Altogether the whole thing took about 22 seconds. I know because I timed it.

And I doubt he got a whole lot of “Amens” for this one. Okay, I’m *sure* he didn’t, because afterwards the people were filled with rage and wanted to throw him off a cliff. Which leads to another one of my preaching mantras, “If people don’t occasionally storm out while you’re preaching, you’re probably not preaching the Gospel.” I don’t encourage that, of course, and it’s been awhile since that’s happened here at St. John’s, but the point is that sermons should also challenge us, not just provide comfort and solace.

Jesus understood this better than anyone. And in Luke’s gospel, this sermon is Jesus’ very first public act. He returns to his hometown and goes to the synagogue. Which makes sense. He’d been baptized by John, filled with the Holy Spirit, driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by satan, and then what? Well, he started teaching in houses of worship. That’s where you would go to tell people about God and to share the good and powerful news of God’s love for all people.

And when he goes home, Jesus doesn’t need to introduce himself. He doesn’t need to stand up and say, “Hi, I’m Jesus and I have a few things to share with you this morning.” Everybody already knows his name; they know that this is Jesus, the carpenter’s son. But he does need to introduce what it is he has been sent into the world to do. Something has changed since Jesus left. When he returns, he’s no longer merely the carpenter’s son, who will settle down to a nice, quiet life in Nazareth.

Through his baptism, Jesus has claimed his identity as God’s son. When the heavens broke open and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and he heard that voice proclaiming, “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased,” things changed. And so this brief sermon at the outset of his public ministry is a statement of Jesus’ purpose; an outline of the mission he has been called to fulfill and the promise he has been sent to embody.

He unrolls the scroll and reads, “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.”

That’s the text. That was the bulk of those 22 seconds. And then he preaches his sermon: “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Coming from anyone else, from any other preacher, this would be wildly delusional. For Jesus, it is the self-revealing of his very identity. Because the Spirit of the Lord *is* upon him. Jesus has indeed been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and

recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. This is why he came into the world. This is the promise he came to fulfill.

I admit I always laugh to myself just a bit whenever I hear this passage — this piece and what follows when Jesus says, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own hometown.” Because after leaving Baltimore and going off to seminary for three years and coming home and getting ordained and being called to serve as the curate at a big downtown parish, the very first time I got up into that large, ornately carved pulpit, the reading was...”A prophet is not without honor except in his own hometown.”

Now, nobody wanted to throw me off a cliff afterwards, but it was a great dose of humility. A reminder that the preacher should never point to himself, but always to the one he serves; always to God. And that no matter how big the pulpit or how fancy the vestments, we’re all on this journey of faith together. Living, learning, loving Jesus Christ with all our heart and soul and mind. That’s the goal. That’s why we gather for worship whether in person or online week after week after week. That’s why we break open the Scriptures together.

Karoline Lewis, who’s a preaching professor at a Lutheran seminary in Minnesota and a Facebook friend, draws a direct line from the Magnificat, to these first words of Jesus’ ministry. And I think she’s on to something. The Magnificat contains the words spoken by Mary in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel after she learns that she will bear God’s son. They are bold and radical words which speak of a great reversal where the proud will be scattered, the mighty cast down, the lowly lifted up, and the hungry filled with good things. Mary’s words look back towards God’s ancient promises, while simultaneously looking forward to the promises being fulfilled through her unborn son. We just heard it on the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

The words of Isaiah that Jesus both proclaims and embodies continue this trajectory of God’s promise to the least, the lost, and the lonely. Jesus’ mission will be to bring good news to the poor, to set the oppressed free, to give sight to the blind. This all points to God’s vision for the world and it is a big, bold, beautiful vision.

Unless, of course, you love the status quo. Unless you want to keep things the way they’ve always been. Unless you’re one of the proud and mighty who has no intention of being cast down from your throne. Unless you’d just assume keep the oppressed under your heel and the poor in their place.

So you start to see why Jesus’ message of radical inclusion may not have always been so well received. Why preaching the Gospel sometimes causes people to storm out. Why the Magnificat has been banned at various moments in history. And why Jesus was strung up on a cross to die.

And it begs the question, how are we contributing to God’s promise to those on the outskirts of society? How are we serving those for whom the status quo is not comfortable, but destructive? How are we living into the big, bold, beautiful vision that lifts people up rather than tearing them down? These are hard questions, because they force us to confront that gap between God’s vision and our reality, between God’s promise and our actions.

We can always do more. We *should* always do more. As both individuals and as a community of faith. We need to mind that gap. To keep striving to minimize the space between the words of Isaiah and Mary and Jesus and the injustice we see in our midst. That's the work of the Christian. That's our calling as followers of Jesus: to both mind and minimize the gap between God's vision and our world.

I encourage you to live by that 22 second sermon. Let the words get deep into your soul, even if they occasionally get under your skin. And know that Jesus came into the world precisely to enact God's big, bold, and beautiful vision for all of us.

The Rev. Tim Schenck
Rector, St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church
Hingham, Massachusetts
[Church Website](#)
Blog: [Clergy Confidential](#)
Twitter: [@FatherTim](#)
[Facebook Page](#)
[Lent Madness](#)
[Amazon Author Page](#)