

A SERMON PREACHED ON JANUARY 27, 2019, AT

BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A friend of mine wrote this to me recently: “Our Vicar, the Reverend Thomas Lewis, told our congregation, 'Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you all understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark, chapter 17.'”

The following Sunday, as Thomas prepared to deliver his sermon; he asked for a show of hands, he wanted to know how many people had read Mark 17. Almost every hand went up.

Thomas smiled and said, 'Mark only has 16 chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying.’”ⁱ

No, I don't plan on preaching about the sin of lying this morning, but I did want to speak about the value of knowing and reading Scripture. I've been teaching the bible for more than 40 years, and that I have read the bible on countless occasions (including straight through twice), there is always something new I encounter with each and every reading that makes it worth reading. Not only the humor I presented this morning (and weekly), but if Scripture is a living Word, then there is always something alive that speaks to you and me, making the message relevant to our present lives. In point, one could take any event that is taking place in the world at the moment and find a biblical reference that relates to it. My father used to say, and I dare think that he was right, that one can use the bible to prove or disprove any event or thought or belief. That's why when Jesus got up and read the Scripture in the temple the people were so amazed. He spoke and read with such authority that those listening immediately knew he had a special connection to the text, and that he understood it and intuited the words in a special/unique way.

When Jesus stood up to read, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the LORD is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor..." It was a mini-sermon; it was also a commissioning; he was stating that he both understood his call and he comprehended how the word, now alive in him, was to act. One of the things he was to accomplish was to proclaim and help to bring forth the year of the Lord, known as the jubilee. The word “jubilee”—literally, “ram’s horn” in Hebrew—is defined in Leviticus

25:9 as the sabbatical year after seven cycles of seven years (49 years). The fiftieth year was to be a time of celebration and rejoicing for the Israelites. What gave Jesus the right to proclaim it was part of the puzzlement over his authority; but he knew the words, he knew the history, he understood the relationship between old and new, and he saw his place in the story. He was to be the living Word, and all things were to bow down before him, as he was the King of Kings. Even at this early stage in his ministry Jesus suspected what he was to do to fulfill the role of Messiahship, and each step he took closer to Jerusalem brought him closer to fulfillment. All that from reading a bit of Scripture. It demonstrates our “guilt by association,” if you will, by the relation we share in reading the Biblical text. Each time we pick up the bible, and particularly when we read it aloud or in a group setting, we are reenacting the Biblical imperative, just as Jesus did in his last meal with his disciples: we do it to make the Word alive, to remember our place within the Christian community. And when we gather together, the Word is fulfilled within our hearing.

Just what do we hear when the Word is amongst us? In my previous congregation, at Christmastide for several years I read the story of the birth of Jesus and asked folks if they had experienced anything new in a text about the angels and the manger, etc., they had heard so often. Quite a few times they would respond with little tidbits they had not remembered. This might have been due to the use of a different translation or perhaps a poor memory of the text. Today’s passage is hardly familiar, but there are some goodies tucked away that are worth ferreting out, things we might have overlooked otherwise.

First, we are told that Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. In other words, the Spirit drove him there just like Satan had driven (vs. lead) Jesus into the wilderness. This portion of the text is known as the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, so when biblical commentators refer to this moment in their writings it is here with these words that it begins.

Second, he went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, *as was his custom*. “As was his custom.” Whatever else he had done during years 12-30 of his life, here’s a clue: he was a regular at worship. This explains why no one questions who he is or what he was doing there. They knew him, and he knew their ways.

Third, why was the scroll of the prophet Isaiah handed to him? Was it by accident or on purpose? Given the section Jesus opens to, it seems that the

gospel writer, *Luke*, is tipping his hand, showing us what is part of his agenda, that Jesus fits the bill of the one who saves, the long-awaited Messiah, the one predicted in Isaiah. The key is the word “scroll” here. Not everyone was given the authority to read it; not everyone would dare to stand as a clue that they intended to read it in public, amidst the other scholars. Perhaps this is also a clue of what else Jesus was doing during those lost years, e.g., studying to be a rabbi. Mary Magdalene calls him that; others use the title also. If we did not have some insights into what took place within the temple, we might miss this also.

And it’s important to note that this is taking place during what we call the season of Epiphany, the time when a believer on his journey discovers something about himself or what is necessary in order for life to take place in the way God desires. In this gospel reading we find several epiphanies, both large and small, that demonstrate to us how hard Jesus is working to understand who he is; he starts out small-town and then works his way to the local community. The early church then moved on to an interpretation that was church-wide and from there, world-wide. Perhaps it is not until his time in Gethsemane that Jesus realizes the full impact of what he must do, the full impact of what must take place.

Of course, in order for Jesus to have any impact on us as the Savior means that we have to believe in God, we have to buy into the notion of redemption, we have to carry in our hearts the purpose of the resurrection, and we have to open our minds to the concept of the incarnation. Each of those are tall roles; all of them compiled into one requires a deeper faith than might be attainable for one sitting, one sermon, one reading - - one lifetime!

Then consider the work of New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis who seeks to include Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a hidden contributor to the story. She writes, “The language of Jesus’ first sermon should sound familiar. Its tone, topics, and concerns share that in common with his mother, who first gives witness and words to her son’s ministry. That is, Mary’s words foreshadow the ministry of her very own son. Mary’s *Magnificat* (My soul magnifies and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, etc.[ch. 2]) echos and reverberates with her son’s first words.

Mary’s song acknowledges that what God has done, her son will do as well. She connects the dots, between the God that she knows, and has always

known, and the God that is orienting her future, through her own son, Jesus. She realizes that God's favor of her will be that which the world will experience because of her son, Jesus.

I wonder if Jesus learned something from his mother in those early years. After all, Luke is the only Gospel to include the 12-year-old Jesus who sends his mother and father into a parental frenzy when he all but disappears and elicits a frantic search for his location. Luke, why include this story and only you? How does that influence our sense of who you think Jesus is, of who we know Jesus to be?

At the risk of over-psychologizing or perhaps, psychologizing in general because it's the Bible, what if Jesus first learned what it means to bring good news to the poor from the stories that his mother told him? About Elizabeth, the mother of his cousin, John? About Sarah, his ancestor, who experienced the same shame? What if he watched his mother and listened to her and saw her as someone who not only knew the good news proclaimed to her but embodied its presence in her life? If so, this could be a most unique season of Epiphany."ⁱⁱ

You see, Jesus' words and actions are a call to a real life, real people, real time. This is God in our present and in our reality.ⁱⁱⁱ When we hear the word of God we should sit up and take notice, for there be a change a'happenin'! To be sure, there is. And it's coming fast, and soon! May we be ready to hear the Word when it is finally proclaimed within our presence.

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ⁱ https://www.funny-jokes.com/humor/jokes/jokes_bible.htm#Lots_Wife_Turned_into_a_Pillar_of_Salt

ⁱⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1558

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*