

Sermon January 26, 2025
[Luke 4:14-21]

"Stay in Your Lane"
Pastor Dan Peterson

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Grace to you, and peace, from God, who is the source of life, and from Jesus Christ, who is that life and light in the world. Amen.

Some of you may recall me saying over the course of my time here that in seminary, I was taught that there are two kinds of sermons: there is the "comfort" sermon, and then there is the "challenge" sermon. Last week was the comfort sermon. We heard about hope and its ground in the person of Jesus Christ.

This Sunday is a challenge sermon. The title of today's message is "Stay in Your Lane," which is a phrase people sometimes use for pastors who are perceived to edge too close to the line between religion and politics. "Stay in your lane, Pastor; don't say *anything* political from the pulpit!"

I have a complaint.

A small group of people have waged war on us. A terrible, pernicious crime has been committed. A grave injustice has been perpetuated, against you, against me, and against Christians across the country, and we know exactly, precisely who is responsible: the editors of the Common Lectionary. Now, the lectionary, as you know, contains readings we use each Sunday for worship over a three-year cycle. It covers roughly 1/3 of the Bible, Old Testament and New. It arranges these readings according to the story of Jesus Christ, the anticipation of his birth, his birth itself, his life ministry,

death and resurrection, followed by the Church that, inspired by the Spirit, was born to continue his mission in the world.

The lectionary has lots of things to admire. It familiarizes us with the story of Jesus from different points of view: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We hear from all four of the Gospels throughout the lectionary years. It requires pastors like me not to preach simply on favorite texts and passages, but to engage and wrestle with difficult texts and passages we may have otherwise ignored. And, it unites Christians, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist denominations; on Sunday morning, when we hear the story of the Gospel, we can be assured that many of our siblings in Christ across the country are hearing the same story.

Yet, when it comes to our Gospel reading for today, there is, I submit, a serious flaw, one that dramatically affects the story, because of a choice the editors of the lectionary made.

You remember Paul Harvey, right? I've mentioned him before in my service. Paul Harvey was a radio broadcaster who hosted a program called "The Rest of the Story." My problem with the lectionary reading today is that it only tells us *half* the story. It only tells us half the story, when it should tell us the rest of the story.

Now, we heard the first part: Jesus had already built a reputation for himself in his hometown and in the surrounding regions, by what he did and by what he taught in the synagogues. "Up to this point," writes Mitzi Smith of Columbia Theological Seminary, "everyone had only good things to say about him." Everyone had only good things to say about him. He had not yet announced his ministry agenda, he had not yet leveled a critique in the synagogue against his own people – up to this point, in other words, Jesus "stayed in his lane."

Our Gospel reading for today continues that theme. Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth, in the region of Galilee, and there, according to his custom, he attends the synagogue, where he reads from the scroll, or book, of Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me," Jesus says, "to bring good news to the poor" (that is, to the poorest of the poor, slaves of poor people.) "He has sent me," Jesus continues, "to proclaim release to the captives," (that is, those who have been captured in war, who were now enslaved), "and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," (which is probably a reference to Jubilee, or the 49th year of the Jewish calendar, where wealth is redistributed and slaves are set free. If you'd like to read more about it, you can go to Leviticus 25.)

Jesus then rolls up the scroll and sits down. The eyes of the assembly are fixed upon him. After a few moments of pregnant silence, Jesus says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In other words, "I am the One God has chosen to do these things."

Here's the problem. That's exactly where the lectionary reading ends, even though the next verse actually completes the first half of the story. It says, "All spoke well of him, (Jesus), and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'"

Why would they ask such a question? Why would they make such a statement? Because Jesus, the local boy, has made good. How? By staying in his lane. By telling the crowds everything they wanted to hear. By teaching in the synagogues, things people could agree with. And everyone, *everyone*, the text says, loved him for it.

But then things change. Unfortunately, however, the second half of the reading is cut off by our lectionary editors. Which raises the question: What is the rest of the story?

In the following verse, the assembly tells Jesus to perform miracles of healing, like he did in Capernaum. But Jesus refuses. He is not a puppet. He is not there to cater to the whims of his people.

Then, he drops a bomb, by making it explicit that the good news he just read and preaches, is not for them. Indeed, stories about prophets like Elijah and Elisha indicate that sometimes foreigners – Mexicans in today's language – experience God's aid when Israel – the United States, in today's language – did not.

Can you imagine me saying that to you, that God favors Mexico over the United States? Imagine how offensive Jesus' words were.

"On that day," writes Smith, "everyone in the synagogue became enraged by Jesus' words to the extent that they transform, from a proud and amazed audience (because Jesus had stayed in his lane) to a murderous crowd, the kind that will eventually take his life, a common theme in the Gospel stories."

This week, we heard from a Bishop who, like Jesus, refused to stay in her lane. Preaching on the day after President Trump's inauguration at the Washington National Cathedral, the Right Reverend Mary Anne Budde spoke for about 15 minutes. She spent the first 13 minutes predictably calling for the need of unity and selflessness – a totally harmless, innocuous message. She painted in broad strokes, and spoken generalities and platitudes, the kind that would have offended no one, because up to the endpoint, she "stayed in her lane."

But then, in the final two minutes of her sermon, and perhaps some of you have seen this or read about this, she turned to President Trump and addressed him directly, asking for, and I quote, "his mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now." His mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. And then she named "gay, lesbian and transgender children of families, Republican, Independent and Democrat." And then she defended people who flee from war-torn countries, seeking amnesty in America, asking for compassion and mercy. And then she advocated for the vast majority of immigrants in the country who are not criminals. She did what Jesus did; and guess what? The response was exactly the same.

The mere request to show mercy drew outrage from the President, who denounced her afterwards and demanded a personal apology. A congressman said Bishop Budde should be deported, and she received numerous death threats, again, all in response to the mere plea for mercy.

The parallel with the response Jesus gets in today's Gospel reading is indeed striking. She did what Jesus did.

This morning we have our Annual Meeting after the worship service, where we will be talking a lot about who we are as a congregation, what we've done over the past year, and what we hope to do in the year to come.

We should ask ourselves, in light of the Gospel reading for today, as well as the example of Bishop Budde: What kind of church do we want to be? What kind of church is God, through the Spirit, calling us to be? Will we simply stay in our lane? Or will we take risks, by finding ways to stand up for the marginalized, by speaking out on behalf of immigrants and strangers in our land, or even, by becoming a sanctuary church, if called upon?

What, in short, is the rest of *our* story?

What, in short, would Jesus have us do?

That question, the question about who we wish to become, is one I leave to you.

Amen.