

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



## “Today”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year C)

March 6, 2016

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21

---

The year of the Lord’s favor...

This is the sermon I would have preached on January 24,  
when we had to cancel church due to snow.

But it’s a good sermon, and I didn’t want to waste it  
because many of you know what it’s like to experience what  
seems to be a terrible, horrible, no good very bad year.

The Finbows are certainly in such a place right now, the Klincks were in such  
a place not too long ago, and the Lawsons and their extended family were, too.  
And others have felt the same way, I am sure.

And so, how does Jesus’ inaugural sermon in the synagogue some 2000 years ago  
connect to our experiences **today** through faith?

*The year of the Lord’s favor...*

Our son traveled to West Virginia recently to reconnect with the family there  
who graciously kept him for nine months to finish his senior year in high school  
when we moved here to Durham.

The younger son in this family has had a pretty amazing year.

Born deaf, mainstreamed through the public school system  
with minimal hearing supplemented by lip-reading and sign language,  
this remarkable young man graduated from college this year

and is in his first full-time job.

And on top of that, he received a cochlear implant in one ear,  
allowing him an even greater degree of connection and communication  
with those around him.

You would think he would be on cloud nine.

But when he met my son in private, after not having seen him for ten years,  
he cried and confessed that life was just so hard for him:  
the girl he had been dating, his first-ever girlfriend, had just broken up with him;  
he has been trying to go to bars to meet people,  
but the ambient noise overwhelms him easily,  
and he finds himself drinking way too much;  
and now he is lonely and depressed.

What seems to be, and what should have been one of his *best years ever*  
is empty and lonely and confusing to this young man.

It certainly does NOT seem to be the year of the Lord's favor for him.

*The year of the Lord's favor...*

Recently, I also had the pleasure of reading

Dr. Henry Marsh's book, *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery*.

Dr. Marsh is a renowned British neurosurgeon, whose memoir tells  
the human, emotional side of being responsible for the lives and deaths  
of his many surgical patients over the course of his career.

His claim to fame is that he helped to develop the technique  
in which brain surgery patients are kept awake, under local anesthesia,  
in order to converse with their surgeons while they operate,  
allowing them to avoid damaging healthy parts of the brain.

"Illness is something that happens only to patients," he says tongue in cheek,  
at the beginning of a chapter recounting the year NOT of the Lord's favor  
in which he, the surgeon, became the patient:

having emergency surgery to avoid a retinal detachment in one eye,  
tumbling in a nasty fall down stairs which resulted in a broken leg,  
and experiencing a vitreous hemorrhage and surgery

to repair a subsequent retinal tear in the other eye, also—

all within the course of a year. (Marsh. *Do No Harm*, p. 215)

Some of you, I know, have had years like this, too, which you were  
glad to dismiss as *annus horribilis!*

It sounds like something out of Harry Potter, doesn't it, *annus horribilis*,  
but it is Latin for *the worst year ever!*

In many ways, 2015 for Durham was an *annus horribilis*, with 42 murders  
in the city, and even more since 2016 began.

In many ways, our most at-risk children of North Carolina  
have experienced an *annus horribilis*, if we rely on a federal report  
that was released in January.

Their findings disclosed that our state's foster care and adoption program  
failed to reach any of the 14 performance standards set as successful  
by the federal government to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

In many ways the stock market was looking like it might be having an *annus horribilis*,  
or at least the worst start since 2008, with plunging averages day after day.

And the citizens of Flint, Michigan, the race to the White House,  
and Duke women's basketball... well, you get my drift.

And perhaps this is how some of the Nazarene locals felt that Sabbath day  
when they crowded together to observe Shabbat, and a familiar young man,  
whom they had known as a child but not seen for a while,  
stood to read the words of the prophet Isaiah.

Perhaps some of them have lost a beloved member of their family  
after a long bout of cancer.

Perhaps some of them have recently lost a baby.

Perhaps some of them have a son or daughter about whom they constantly worry.

Perhaps some of them have experienced a crash in their stock  
of marketable sheep or goats.

Perhaps some of them could not seem to regain health in their family.

And to these eager ears, the words chosen by Jesus would have come

as fresh wind and fresh fire—an invasion of God’s Spirit upon their  
dry and scorched souls.

Jesus, the Spirit bearer, has just returned from a desert sojourn,  
where he was baptized by John and anointed by the Holy Spirit,  
which descended upon him like a dove.

Jesus, the Spirit bearer, has just returned from a hellish wilderness wrestle  
where he was full of the Spirit and led by the Spirit to discern  
which narrative he would adopt as his life’s calling:  
the world’s narrative of power and might;  
of success and acquisition; of self reliance, dominance, and exclusion,  
or Yahweh-God’s counter-narrative of care and nurture; of education  
and social action; of invitation, welcome and neighbor-love of all kinds.

In which worldview will he choose to live? To which values will he pledge his troth?  
This debut in the synagogue is his answer to that question, as he enters the space,  
*filled with the power of the Holy Spirit*, Luke says.

Jesus will be *Spirit dependent*, wherever he goes, in whatever he does,  
and Jesus will be *a conduit of the Holy Spirit* wherever he goes,  
and with whomever he meets.

The Spirit of the Lord, which Jesus proclaims is upon him,  
is the same Spirit of the Lord which he rises to share with us.

And to those hearers yesterday and today, impoverished of spirit,  
imprisoned by illness, depression, loss, poverty, or injustice,  
blind or deaf to full connection with the community we crave,  
oppressed by life denying forces, Jesus as conduit of Spirit empowerment  
breathes words that are like water to parched souls!

Theologian Marcus Borg says Jesus “was a spirit person, subversive sage,  
social prophet, and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers  
into a transforming relationship with *the same Spirit*  
that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision  
was shaped by the *core value of compassion*”

(Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 119).

By spirit person, Borg means that Jesus was a “mediator of the sacred”

for whom the Spirit of God was a reality that was experienced  
*with compassion* as its central quality of God.

“The image of Jesus as a spirit person has implications for how we think of the Christian life,” Borg says. “It shifts the focus from believing in Jesus or believing in God to being in relationship to the same (compassionate) Spirit that Jesus knew” (Borg, p. 39).

I don't think the family, friends and people in the synagogue really minded hearing these beautiful and liberating words from the prophet Isaiah recited by Jesus.

In a way they are not unlike the Beatitudes from the inaugural address of Jesus early in Matthew's narrative:  
*blessed are the poor in Spirit;*  
*blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek;*  
*blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;*  
*the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers, the persecuted* (Matthew 6:3–10).

Neither differ that much in their liberating content.

But what *is* different is that in Luke's narrative,  
Jesus implies that this spiritual empowerment, this freedom,  
this jubilee new year, this counter-narrative of *the survival of most spirit dependent*,  
this *annus mirabilis*, year of the Lord's favor,  
is present **today, immediately**, to the lowest of the low,  
to the weakest of the weak, to the meekest of the meek,  
to the ones whose lives scarcely seem to matter  
or to register on our scale of human awareness.

Matthew Charles, one of our long time street friends  
who has been ringing our church doorbell frequently and often  
over the thirteen years I have been working here,  
keeps paying us regular visits, whether we give him what he wants, or not.  
Why, I asked him one time? Why have you kept coming to our door for 13 years?  
“Because,” he said, “God is always dividing the loaves from the fish,

but you are the ones who always show me *favor.*"

**Today**, he is seen and loved by God's very self. And I think that's what sets successful people's teeth on edge: that God's favor isn't earned, it isn't necessarily merited by the world's standards; it is just given, granted by Jesus as gift, immediately, **today**.

So, if you're in the camp of hearers who resent too much good news for someone else, then you just might go away mad **today**, pondering possible harm to the messenger.

It's happened before. It will happen again.

But if you're in the camp of the hearers who have experienced an *annus horribilis* or know someone or some group of people who just can't seem to catch a break, then Jesus' words turn your world on its head, without delay, promising **today** the transformative grace of God.

I hear Jesus, the Spirit bearer's inaugural address as a clarion call to a discipleship of compassionate action, towards those who suffer from any impoverishment, from captivity, from slavery, from imprisonment, from sensory impairment, from isolation, from oppression, and from the exile of human disfavor.

There is no day but today to bring good news and new beginnings from God's anointed to God's beloved.

But I also hear Jesus, the Spirit bearer's inaugural address as *a blessing* of light and liberty to those who have walked in darkness and experienced a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year.

And so I want to conclude with a blessing by Jan Richardson called "A Prophet's Blessing."

*This blessing*

*finds its way*

*behind the bars.*

*This blessing*

*works its way*

*beneath the chains.*

*This blessing  
knows its way  
through a broken heart.*

*This blessing  
makes a way  
where there is none.*

*Where there is  
no light,  
this blessing.*

*Where there is  
no hope,  
this blessing.*

*Where there is  
no peace,  
this blessing.*

*Where there is  
nothing left,  
this blessing.*

*In the presence  
of hate.*

*In the absence  
of love.*

*In the torment  
of pain*

*In the grip  
of fear.*

*To the one  
in need.*

*To the one  
in the cell.*

*To the one  
in the dark.*

*To the one  
in despair.*

*Let this blessing come  
as bread.*

*Let this blessing come  
as release.*

*Let this blessing come  
as sight.*

*Let this blessing come  
as freedom.*

*Let this blessing come.*

(Jan Richardson. *The Painted Prayerbook*. Epiphany 3: To Proclaim Release)

Amen.