

# A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

by Burt L. Burleson

## "From a Distance"

*(The fourth in an Epiphany series entitled, "A Compelling Faith")*

**Luke 4: 14-30**

**February 8, 2004**

Have you ever noticed... in the worship guide, the way we use the word, **"from?"** As in, **"a reading from Psalm 79."** It's our way, my way, of saying, we've edited some here.

Maybe it was too long... didn't fit in the litany or on the page?

Maybe the language was so archaic that we had to paraphrase.

Or maybe we just didn't want to read that line.

It happens, the Lectionary edits and so do worship planners. Sometimes the theology expressed is so harsh or the feeling expressed is so raw that I just leave it out.

Sunday School's a place where we can think and deal with every line and nuance and we can react and help one another make sense of things. But in worship, when the text says something like, **"God, I wish you'd just slaughter all my enemies..."** we usually edit.

Students looking over my shoulder get a little nervous... **"Can we really do this?" "Um... are we allowed to edit the Word of God." "There's probably some rule about that... huh?"**

Interestingly enough, Jesus did... edit that is. In this gospel scene, when he goes to his hometown.

Jesus had been out preachin'... He'd gotten the "show on the road," so to speak and news had spread fast through the whole countryside.

Matthew and Mark, incidentally, place this story much later in their accounting of Christ's ministry. Luke presents it earlier as some kind of foreshadowing or a kind of thematic springboard.

Jesus is baptized,

preaches for a few months,

and heads home for Spring Break.

You can imagine that the city is all "abuzz" with the news that Jesus has come home. There are all sorts of reports from Capernaum about the healings that Jesus did there. People are begining to talk and speculate. And for the most part the City-Fathers are swelling with pride. Jesus is one of theirs. **"Of course, something good can come out of Nazareth."**

It was Jesus's custom, says Luke, to go to the synagogue... this sort of church house of the day. It developed during the exile when there was no temple. So now, they gathered as a community around the text and not the altar. I guess a good thing, but also dangerous because a text can be handled... (or so we think). Altars are more mysterious.

Any way, it was customary that the visiting preacher would be invited to read and to say a few words. The place no doubt was packed. The rabbi had already asked everyone to scoot down and make room.

It was an exciting day... kind of a "pack the pew," high-attendance thing happening. The Minister of Education was just glowing... Treasurer couldn't wait to pass the plate.

Anyway, Jesus stands up to read from Isaiah 61 verses one and two. I say from because he leaves a line out. He's reading along...

**“Preach good news to the poor...**

**Bind up the brokenhearted...**

**Proclaim freedom for captives, release from dark prisons...**

**And the favorable year of the Lord.”**

He comes to proclaim Jubilee... That year of grace when all debts are canceled.

And Jesus doesn't finish the sentence. The sentence is, **“To proclaim the year of Jubilee and the day of vengeance of our God.”** He edits out the part... where God gets even with all those who aren't on Yahweh's side. He even adds a line from a few pages prior about how the blind will recover their sight. He's not just leaving stuff out... he's mixing and matching.

And don't you find it interesting that Jesus leaves out the part about God's vengeance?

John Killinger once said that Jesus was God's way of dealing with a bad reputation. There was a lot of vengeance talk in the Old Testament. And for sure, there were plenty of folks there in Nazareth that day who were really drawn to those passages... to that vengeance talk. They wanted a god and believed in a god who would get even with the bad guys and they were pretty sure they knew who the bad guys were.

Jesus edits out the vengeance when he reads this defining text. Then he sits down and says, **“Today this has been fulfilled in your very ears.”**

They didn't seem to notice that he'd edited out the vengeance line... and interestingly enough... they weren't bothered at all that he implies he's the Messiah.

Funny thing... in Matthew and in Mark... When Jesus claims that this scripture has been fulfilled (in other words, when he claims Messiahship) the riot is incited. **“Kill him, he thinks he's the Messiah. Off with his head.”**

In Luke, it's just the opposite. Everyone seems to be saying, "Aaaaaaammmmmeeennnnnn." **“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”**

**“Hey, that's Joseph's boy... Joe sure would be proud.”**

**“Seems just like yesterday that he was running around here playing ball.”**

**“Yeah, I coached him in street ball, you know. Heck of an infielder... taught him everything he knows.”**

**“I taught him speech... he always was my best student.”**

**“He's Nazareth born and bred alright.”**

They're all nudging each other... **“This is gonna put us on the map.”** Luke portrays this as a very positive moment. **“This scripture is fulfilled today... Amen.”**

I can't be sure, but I think Jesus is really bothered that these folks haven't really heard what he was trying to say. Sometimes preachers know that the fact that no one is

offended means no one has gotten it... Hearing is so hard.

So... Jesus goes to middlin' It almost looks like he picks a fight. **"I know what you're thinking... Your thinking I ought to heal myself, huh? Or maybe thinking about that proverb how prophets can't go to preachin' in their hometown. I know you folks."**

The room does one of those collective, **"Huhs????"** Everyone's forehead scrunched up wondering just where he was going. Breakthrough usually begins with a scrunched up forehead. Breakthrough or a lynching... which is what happened in this story.

Jesus does something, very simple... very off-the-cuff... and unaggressive. He just refers to two Old Testament stories... just mentions them... And when the people heard this, Luke says that they were **"furious."**

Furious??? **For goodness sakes folks, these are just true stories from your own bible. Go home and check your own New American Study Scroll... they're in there.**

Isn't this a strange reaction. ... No problem for Jesus to claim that God's kingdom had arrived when he got to town but my gosh, don't make reference to an Old Testament story.

They knew these stories....

What's the big deal?

Jesus just points out the obvious.

**"Hey, have you folks ever noticed in that story about Elijah and that terrible three year famine, that God sent Elijah to a gentile widow? And have you ever noticed in Elisha's time that even though there were bunches of Jews with leprosy, God only cleansed that one gentile, Naaman?"**

**"Heresy.... How dare you tell us our own story and point out the obvious."**

They were furious and the worshipping congregation turns into a lynching mob, just like that. They run Jesus out of town and are ready to run him over a cliff. ... Touched a nerve, I guess.

It's clear from a distance what the nerve was. It was an exclusive nerve. They knew, who was in and who was out... who God was going to take vengeance on. Who and what God hated... they knew. Their God... Their messiah... Their salvation... Their preferential status.

These folks hated what was beyond their boundaries. Some of them were a little bothered already that Jesus had begun his ministry in Capernaum... which was an ethnically diverse place. Lots of gentiles. And they knew... as they often said... that **"gentiles were just fuel for the fires of hell."**

Some of them were a little suspicious that Jesus had preached there first... but now this... Now this suggestion that God's compassion and love extended beyond their city limits and beyond the bounds of ethnicity and even orthodoxy.

They were furious at the suggestion. **"God loves and cares about people who don't live like us and even those who don't believe in Him?" "Gentiles... acceptable to God... you're out of your mind and you're out of here."**

It's clear from a distance what the nerve was that Jesus struck. And in a way, it

surprises us... because this message of inclusive grace is all through the Old Testament.  
**“Abraham... I’m going to bless you so you guys can bless the whole world.”**

The story of Jonah is this story... It’s God caring for people they hate and it’s about their hatred of the fact that God doesn’t hate them too. Jonah doesn’t go preach to Nineveh because he wants them dead. And at then end he is up to his eyeballs in bitterness... **“I knew it, I knew you couldn’t smash them... Where’s the vengeance of God I’ve heard so much about.”**

Jesus reminds them about a couple of stories that show Gentiles are on the inside too and they freak. It’s easy for us to see from a distance. But in Nazareth... in the synagogue... with all that they presume is at stake, they can’t see the irony in what they’re doing. **“Kill him... he just read the wrong part of the bible.”** We all edit... we just all don’t admit we do.

They’re so mad... killing mad. And in a way, it surprises us... but really it shouldn’t because this is the story. The human story and so it’s ours. Our instincts are often conditioned to these sorts of reactions and this sort of thinking.

**“Who’s in and who’s out?”**

**“Who’s wrong and how shall they be punished?”**

**“Who’s beneath me... how am I preferred?”**

**“Who’s above me and how do I compare?”**

Much of our identity gets firmed up in this way. I know who I am by who I excluded... The ego needs to sense its status. The Greek system on college campuses is just more honest than we tend to be. **“You... don’t get to be... one of us.” “But I want to be one of you!” “You can’t... if everyone gets in, we aren’t so special and worse, we won’t know who we are.”**

(I was in one, by the way, and it sure felt good... for me anyway.) From a distance it seems very small and incredibly cruel.

Self-righteousness is a dangerous and a powerful thing. It’s so blinding. In a sermon on this text Barbara Brown Taylor says, **“They mean to kill him for challenging their righteousness, which means that Jesus’ first act of ministry foreshadows his last.”** (The Preaching Life)

It’s a big theme in Jesus’ teachings in Luke. **“Don’t judge and you won’t be judged; do not condemn and you won’t be condemned.” “I wouldn’t bother trying to get the speck out of someone else’s eye with that 2 x 4 sticking out of your own.”**

We like to hear this stuff as long

as it applies to everyone else...

It’s so hard to hear and see

where it’s present in our lives.

The disciples heard him preach this way but didn’t get it. When a village of Samaritans refused them hospitality on their way to Jerusalem, they’re furious. **“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them... can we, huh, please Jesus, can we?”** They’re ready to kill just like the Nazarenes were.

It’s Luke who tells the story of the Prodigal... (to teachers of the law, btw). The self-righteous older brother is standing out in his field at the end of it all, **“perfectly right, and perfectly alone.”** (Taylor)

And from a distance we all say of the story and the brother, **“Silly older brother.”**

Grace is only offensive when it's our stuff, our thinking, our ideas and our way, being threatened. It's just so hard to see our own self-righteousness. Maybe the clue for us is when we begin to feel offended... when a boundary is crossed... maybe we need to look inside.

Because Grace isn't boundaried and neither is God... period... and it's offensive. And we're scared because we think somehow radical grace makes us valueless. It doesn't... it should however make us humble... very, very humble.

Do you know the hymn, There's a Wideness in God's Mercy? Most hymnals have removed a line. They shouldn't have taken it out because we need in on days like today. In moments when grace rubs us the wrong way. The missing stanza contains this great line. ***But we make his love too narrow by false limits of our own. And we magnify his judgments with a zeal he will not own.*** (Ernest Campbell)

Like most of you, I grew up wearing things on Sunday that were my very best.... slacks, suspenders, coats... things I never wore any other day of the week. My Sunday best.

What was underneath that? What was behind that? Was there not a theology subtly and regularly reinforced, that you must be at your best for God and you must be at your best for those in the church? Does it not say that, **"God and God's church only have dealings with the pure."** (Ernest Campbell)

Ernest Campbell says that we ought to have, at least once a year in our churches, a Come as You Were on Saturday Sunday.

**"Come with the jam running down your T-shirt.**

**Come with your hair not as neat as it ought to be.**

**Come with the shoes that have holes in them.**

**So that you might say to yourself and to others, that God receives us as we are (Campbell)."**

If grace, the fact that God's acceptance knows no boundaries, has begun to offend us... that's good news, I think. Maybe we're getting it... maybe we're waking up. The alternative is to be furious and just do away with Jesus... or at least domesticate him.

It won't work, though. At the end of the story he just slips through the crowd. Jesus will not be handled. He does however, want to get a hold of you and your heart. I sure hope you'll let Him. I sure hope we will in this place. Amen.

Burt L. Burlison, Copyright, 2004