

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

## **“Both-And Christianity”**

**By Eric Howell**  
**Luke 4:17-30**  
**January 31, 2010**

Sometimes, Christianity is the best, most hopeful, most helpful thing you have going in your life. Your faith is what helps sustain you through hard times and give you direction. The Scripture helps you make sense of life as the words take hold of you. Your faith brings order to chaos, joy in sadness, hope in hopelessness, courage in a time of fear, peace when you need it. Sometimes, being a Christian is what helps you get through the rest of life.

At its shallowest, when Christianity functions this way in our lives, it can be reduced to simply a therapy for troubled emotions. But even then, don't we need this? There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Life is not easy. Let's face it. A couple of weeks ago when Nigel Wright was here, he said, "people are complicated." He's right. We are complicated. Any one of us might not appear so at first, but when you get to know someone beneath the shallow surface, you begin to discover the web of thoughts, fears, relationships, hopes and dreams, disappointments and dysfunctions, sins and shortcomings, hidden talents and delightful nuggets that make up each person's life. You don't know that at first usually. It only comes with time and relationship and trust. It's what you get in return for being a friend. As one of you said recently, "Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people don't know the difference."

We ourselves are not all that is complicated. Life is complicated, too. So a complicated person navigates a complicated life. There's a lot going on in any one person's life, and then multiply that by the number of relationships and responsibilities, roles, and stressors that come and it can be tough.

So the simple Christian message: God made you. God knows you. God loves you. God saves you. God protects you. God preserves you . . . comes as welcome fresh air. Sometimes, Christianity is the best thing you've got going.

But . . . sometimes it's not. Sometimes, Christianity is the hardest, most challenging, most difficult part of your life. It can be both. Our faith can take a broken life and makes it whole. And it can take a seemingly placid life and turn it upside down. It can take chaos and bring order. And it can take a carefully-ordered life and divinely disorder it. Christianity can take everything you know and help you make sense of it and survive it. Christianity can take everything you know and toss it out and remake you. It can help and it can hurt. It can comfort and it can cut. It can soothe and it can seethe. And sometimes it does both in such rapid succession that maybe we begin to see how it's not either-or as if we get to choose our version of Christianity: it's both-and; it chooses us.

On the evening Jesus unrolls a scroll and reads Isaiah 61, the words are first heard as words of comfort and hope. The people might have heard something like this, “God is good and hasn’t forgotten about me. I may be a wretch by choices I made and circumstances I had no control over . . . I may be poor in every sort of way, I may be imprisoned by my own self; I may be oppressed by my relative weakness. I may be blind and don’t even know it. But God is good and will come . . . someday will come to rescue me and all of us chosen ones because God is faithful to us and has promised that someday we will be redeemed. So all is not lost . . . ever.” The people murmur good words about Jesus . . . isn’t this Joseph’s son? My how he has grown, what a good teacher . . . what a good boy.

Then the mood in the room changes pretty quickly. And by the end of the evening, the people try to throw Jesus, the same one they just praised . . . they try to throw Him off a cliff outside of town. It gives, “Come away with me to a quiet place” a new meaning.

What Jesus did was take something comforting and see the challenging in it. He references two stories from 1 Kings about two great prophets—Elijah and Elisha—those guys were sort of national heroes. Their stories and memories were remembered and repeated as evidence of God’s provision and care for Israel in times of great need. When you go back and read their stories, it’s easy to see pre-echoes of the ministry of Jesus in their miracles. And furthermore, and this is important, when Elijah and Elisha did something, it was always a sign of something more. In other words, their miracles and acts of healing or mercy always had a point they were making. Prophets acted like that. They did stuff—sometimes, strange stuff—to make a point. Jeremiah locks himself in neck irons and walks around town as a sign of the fate Israel is about to have. Hosea marries a harlot as a sign of Israel’s idolatry of cheating on God with false idols. Their actions were understood to be teaching moments about some larger truth about God.

So, Jesus remembers—and reinterprets—two brief, very familiar stories. Elijah goes to a widow woman and by a miracle multiplies her diminished food in a famine. Elisha encounters Naaman a leper and heals him of his debilitating disease.

These seem like stories of good news, the kind of stories that make faith hopeful and helpful. God loves you. God can heal you. God can protect you. It’s the kind of story that warms the heart and helps you know how to live. If God’s saints do this, then God is like this, and in response, we should live like this. So if God’s saints heal and show mercy, then God is a healing, merciful God, and so we live with hope that God will come and heal our land and show mercy to us. As they say, that will preach.

Jesus invokes these memories and lessons, but also something else. He notices something in the stories. As if to demonstrate there’s another side to these things, another, sometimes overlooked, aspect to God’s work, and thus to God, and thus, perhaps to the way we see the world and act in it, Jesus points out a couple of small, but significant details in the stories.

Elijah goes to a woman in Sidon, an area of people who were different from the Israelites, untrustworthy, an old nemesis. These were people who liked the ocean. Israel never liked the ocean and never liked people who liked the ocean. You can’t trust people who felt comfortable on the water. It’s dangerous. They are dangerous. But Elijah goes

there. And Elisha heals Naaman, a Syrian, a long-standing enemy of Israel. So, Jesus coyly asks, weren't there any widow women in Israel? Elijah could have gone to? Weren't there any lepers in Israel? Of course there were, so why Sidon? Why Syria? What would God seemingly, to the neglect of the chosen people, the insiders, the members of God's household . . . why would God's mercy, apparently in somewhat limited supply, be parceled to outsiders? What does that say about being in God's service? What does that say about God? What does that say to us?

If God is going out there, to the outsiders, to the margins, even to the enemy, that might shuffle our deck when it comes to what Christianity does in our lives. Those poor first disciples probably didn't see this coming when they started following Jesus around. Did they know they would find themselves on the very edges of society—with lepers, the poor, women of questionable character, men who served the enemy, and all sorts of other people who weren't stamped and approved?

Maybe this was good, comforting news for them because they saw themselves as that kind of person and found in Jesus someone who saw something in them that was holy and worthwhile when no one else did. Maybe this way of life was the best thing going for them. And maybe it was the hardest. Maybe what Jesus did and led them to do challenged every perspective, assumption, safety-zone, prejudice, common-sense, self-interested impulse they ever had before Jesus and still struggled with long after they started getting the dust from His feet on the hems of their robes. Christianity can be the best thing going in your life and can be the hardest thing going in your life.

It's both, and we've experienced both. And each occasion on which we are brought face to face with the Eucharist, we enter the realm of the deeply comforting and terribly troubling of our faith. The faith of Jesus was one that led him to the cross; the faithfulness of God was such that it raised him from the dead. Is the Eucharist good news or hard news? Is it the comfort of familiar ritual with basic elements of life, restoring our prayers as we join in this ancient tradition? Or . . . is it the poignant reminder of the cross each of us is told to take up if we are to be His followers? Is it a sacrament of wholeness for the one who is broken this morning as you remember the gracious, resurrecting, saving love of Jesus? Or is it a sacrament of brokenness for the one who comes whole today, as you remember Jesus' body on the cross, the sacrifice paid for your sins by the one who was sinless? The answer is within you. You don't get to choose; it chooses you.

We'll have times when our faith is the one thing getting us out of bed in the morning, when church worship is the one place in the week when we can find the True and the Good. Christianity can be wonderful in our lives. We'll also know times when Christianity takes a different route to the True and the Good and makes life harder by what it calls us to do and be. I recently read an account from Will Willimon when he and Stanley Hauerwas were co-leading a seminar for preachers. One pastor said in a plaintive voice, "I was sent by the denomination to a little town in South Carolina. I preached one Sunday on the challenge of racial justice. In two months my people were so angry that the bishop moved me. At the next church, I was determined for things to go better. Didn't preach about race. But we had an incident in town, and I felt forced to speak. The board met that week and voted unanimously for us to be moved. My wife was insulted at the supermarket. My children were beaten up on the school ground." Willimon's pastoral heart went out to this dear, suffering brother. Hauerwas replied,

“And your point is what? We work for the living God, not a false, dead god! Did somebody tell you it would be easy?”

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