

# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “THE SHOCK OF THE WORD”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 4: 14-30

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 26, 2025  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 4: 14-30

### **The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry**

*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.*

### **The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth**

*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.” 22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph's son?” 23 He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ ” 24 And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

### **The Shock of the Word**

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

There's an old story about a Sunday school teacher who asked her class, “Why do we study the Bible?” A little boy raised his hand and confidently declared, “So we know when the preacher is making stuff up!”

That little boy may have been onto something. I dare say, even preachers can lose sight of the fact that a sermon is to be rooted and grounded in God's Word and not their own.

I recently visited with several friends and colleagues from similar sized Presbyterian churches in SC. You may find it interesting to know that there are about 8 Presbyterian churches in our state that have memberships of over 1,000 members, and, not surprisingly, we share a fair amount in common.

We try to get together as Pastors every so often (usually virtually), but this past Tuesday we met in person, and we did so at the Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Columbia, and, thankfully, we all managed to get there and back before the snow set in.

Part of our time together was spent reflecting upon an article that was written by David Brooks (Brooks is an opinion columnist for the New York Times), the article is entitled: *"The Shock of Faith, It's Nothing Like I Thought it Would Be."*

In his article, Brooks reflects upon the wonder and the awe, the "experience of faith," and while I am undoubtedly with Brooks in terms of the importance of making room for and celebrating the in-breaking power of God in our lives, the transcendent and the inspirational, I do worry about what happens when our experiences are interpreted apart from the Word of God.

Or ponder it another way, **What Happens** when that which we perceive to be a faithful experience is detached from the Bible? When the things that we see and taste and touch, and which elicit from us strong and emotional responses, **What Happens** when those experiences become the driving force behind who we think God is and what we believe God may be saying to us?

To put it plainly, if our experiences become for us the center of our discerning attention, then they will have made of them an idol, a false god.

In our NT Lesson from Luke 4, the people knew Jesus (they had watched him grow up), and, as faithful Jews, it is certainly understandable if not unavoidable that they had certain expectations about what the Messiah would look like and it happened that what they knew, it impaired their ability to hear Jesus' message.

Jesus had just returned to his hometown, his home synagogue and had done so in the power of the Holy Spirit, and, upon his arrival, Jesus is given the distinct privilege and responsibility of reading and proclaiming God's Word.

Now, the logistics of preaching in Jesus' day and age were a little different than they are for us. For example, while their process would have also begun with a reading from the Scriptures, instead of remaining standing (as is our practice), the preacher would have sat down in a chair and the people would have sat on the floor around them.

In Jesus' case, they handed him the scroll of Isaiah, and Jesus found the place where it was written, "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

After the reading, Jesus sat down, and as one commentator puts it, "All heaven broke loose!" Indeed, with all the authority in heaven and on earth, Jesus preached his "Hometown Homily," a sermon that was one sentence long (Now, don't go getting any ideas!). Turns out that all Jesus needed to say...he said in 9 words: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

At first the worshippers in the synagogue seem to appreciate what Jesus said. The Bible tells us that they "spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

But wait a minute! "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they ask. Jesus then proceeds to reference Isaiah, as well as our reading this morning from 1 Kings chapter 17, and he effectively tells the people that they are no better than the faithless Jews of Elijah and Elisha's day. Not only that, but that the blessings of God would extend to people other than the Jews!

In saying these things, Jesus was providing his friends and neighbors with some key insights into who he was and what he came to do, all of which were congruent with the Scriptures -- but the people of Nazareth were expecting a different kind of Messiah!

Many of them wanted a Messiah who would be political, and who would overthrow worldly powers, and who would exalt the Kingdom of Israel and put her back on top of the world order!

The problem was, their hopes and dreams, their expectations -- they simply were not grounded in the truth that Jesus Christ embodied.

The theologian Karl Barth asserted that the Bible is not our word, but rather God's Word, and as such, it naturally confronts us, reveals our sin, shatters our preconceived notions about who God is, and calls us to a way of life where God's ways are more important than our ways!

This was the kind of confrontation that was facing the people in Nazareth that day and they were blind to it! It makes me wonder how often we too may be blind to the work of God in our midst!

We see devastating floods and fires, and our experience might tell us that God has abandoned but that is not what God says!

Through the Psalmist, God declares that he is a very present help in times of need, and through his Apostles, God demonstrates time and time again that he is for us and not against us, that God is forever about the business of enabling courage, and healing, and hope, and peace in those places where there seems to be only chaos, and despair, and pain, and fear!

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his sonnet, *God's Grandeur*, put it this way: "*The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil...*"

Hopkins describes God's presence as being everywhere, just waiting to flame out, as it were, waiting to be perceived; but it does require of us a humility to know that it is, after all, the grandeur of God that we are talking about and not a torch of our own lighting.

And that which gives us definitive guidance as to the true glory of God in our midst, God's everyday banquets of grace, it is that which God has already revealed to us in the person and work Jesus Christ, and in the Scriptures that are to be read and interpreted in light of their witness to him!

Last weekend I was happy that James allowed me to serve as one of the chaperones at the Winter Retreat to Winterplace, West Virginia, for many of the students and friends of First (Scots).

Now, James, being the wonderful organizer that he is, he had each of us as advisors assigned to certain roles and responsibilities prior to our trip, and one of mine was to lead a series of three interconnected devotionals having to do with certain roads in the Bible and what they tell us about God.

For example, on the first night we considered how Saul's Damascus Road experience changed him, **and we considered how it is that from that story we also learn something** about how God changes us, that God has both the ability and the inclination to transform our lives!

And this is an important distinction, especially seeing as our experience would sometimes suggest that when God enters our lives, that we don't need to change a thing!

We heard the story of the Good Samaritan, and the road he took while traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, and we gained a better understanding of how God used a Samaritan to make a difference in another person's life **and we considered how it is that from that story, from that parable. We learn something** about how God calls us to make a difference.

In a world where we may be inclined to keep to ourselves, God lets it be known that ours is not merely a definition birthed from the question, "Who is my neighbor?" but rather a practical and life's application of the question, "Whose neighbor am I?"

We also looked at the story of the Emmaus Road, and we talked about how God walked with his followers and how he was made known to them in Jesus' proclamation of the Word and the breaking of bread **and we considered how it is that from that story we also learn something** about how Jesus walks with us!

And is that not a truth about God that we also need to hear? To know that in a world where jobs are lost, and relationships struggle, and business flounder, to know in our hearts the Biblical affirmation that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love!

In this way and others, God's Word to us is not trapped in antiquity, it is certainly not relegated to a small village synagogue in a town called Nazareth! No!

The miracle is that Jesus is still proclaiming good news to the poor, and release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. And inasmuch as Jesus has come near, so has the blessed kingdom of God!

But if we are going to truly understand what that means in our life and in the life of the world today, then we must make room for a vision of God that is molded and shaped by what the Bible says about him and not about what we may want to say about him.

Does what we experience matter? Sure, it does! Do God's everyday banquets of grace serve to inspire us and draw us into closer company with one another as a community of faith, of course they do!

Our life experience matters! What we see with our own two eyes, it matters! But what God sees; well, that matters even more!

What I am trying to say is that, without knowing the heart and mind of God that has been revealed to us in the Scriptures, we will simply miss out on the meaning and the purpose and fullness of our experiences, every single one of them!

Our life, just as is the case with our experiences, our life is simply and woefully incomplete until it finds its rest in God! Until that time when, by grace through faith, we begin to see the world more and more as God would see it.

That's the shock of the Word! It is a shock which opens our eyes and ears to what God wants us to see and hear, it equips and renews and sustains, it helps us to see God for who he is and not for who we think God is!

How do we know if a preacher or anyone is making stuff up? Or how do we, any of us, how do we know if we are co-opting the Word of God to fit in with our vision or ideology or politics.

We see this in the world today when through our experiences there emerges the proclamation of a liberal Jesus or a conservative Jesus and we have the audacity to challenge someone's Christian integrity if their Jesus doesn't align – ah, that's us, that's what we do!

What God does, is set the record straight! And to know how he does it, we must study the heart and mind of Christ; we must lean not into our own understanding but be transformed by the renewing of our minds through Jesus Christ our Lord!

For when that happens, when we more fully recognize that God's Word provides a roadmap for life and living, covenants and commandments by which we know how to live and how to love and which help us to see God clearly.

Oh, when that happens, our life and the life of the world cannot and will not remain the same!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.