***“Saving Jesus from the Church”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on February 2, 2025*

*based on Luke 4:21-30*

Let me ask you a basic question: What do you expect from a sermon? I hope your expectations are rather high. This church has had a long history of attracting congregants who expect something from the sermon time. I hope I’ve lived up to that and maybe raised that bar a little. That’s a goal I set for myself every single Sunday.

When I began attending church in the 1960s a pastor could be nearly illiterate and there would still be three or four hundred people in church. Sometimes they’d be napping, but they’d be there. What else was there to do on a Sunday morning in those days?

Today is different. People expect more. A sermon should at least be as interesting as a TED Talk. TED Talks have done a lot to raise the bar for sermons. I’m grateful for that.

Well, I’m guessing that in Jesus’s day, expectations for the sermon were more like the 1960s. Pretty low. So it wasn’t a surprise that the pastor there at Nazareth was willing to step aside on a Sunday morning when he heard that one of the lads who’d gone to Sunday School there in his youth had come home from far-off Capernaum to pay a long overdue visit to his mom. Why not? What’s to lose?

Luke says that this was Jesus’s first sermon. They give him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Maybe it’s already open to the passage he read. More likely though, he rolled it out in order to find just these words full of hope.

If you were here last Sunday, you heard them: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to preach the year of God’s favor. These words have been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Well, we’re told the people approved of his reading. He read it well, that seems clear. They liked his choice of texts. It was good news of course. But, you know, it was just preaching.

I mean, I doubt these people who lived way out in the Galilean provinces in a place the Romans never bothered to patrol had any expectations for change. They’d been born into an authoritarian world. They figured they’d die in it well before anything ever changed. It was very much like Putin’s Russia is today for people in their 20s and early 30s who can’t remember anything before him.

That business Jesus read where Isaiah proclaimed “the year of God’s favor” looks back to an ancient Old Testament hope that someday a year would come round when the ruling party would declare that everyone’s debts, no matter how high, would be forgiven. Everyone, no matter how poor, would be zeroed out; they’d get a chance to start over again, fresh.

Well, no one in Jesus’s home congregation knew if that had ever really happened. I mean, they were wise. People didn’t take much of the Bible literally, then. And they certainly didn’t expect that the empire of Rome would make debt forgiveness a reality in their day. There was zero hope the empire would bring mercy to anyone who needed it. Far from it.

Mercy? Isaiah might as well have proclaimed a day when rain water would turn into beer and pigs would sprout wings.

I mean, look, it’s just … preaching. It lasts 20 minutes and it’s designed to make you feel a little better, a little more hopeful than when you came in the door.

It’s meant to give you a little lift, even if it’s pie-in-the-sky. You smile and nod after that kind of sermon; a sermon that will say nothing specific about economic injustice; never mention what everyone knows, that 90% of the world’s total wealth is in the greedy little hands of eight to ten multi-billionaires. No, the sermon will be just a little balm for your wounds and then you will shake hands with the preacher on the way out the door and go back to life, as is -- a daily hand-to-mouth grind.

Well, wait. Not on THIS particular Sunday at the Presbyterian franchise in Nazareth. The preacher, Jesus, rolls up the scroll and, as was the custom, he sits down to preach. And that is when the trouble starts. That’s when the doo-doo hits the fan … a contraption that hadn’t yet been invented, but they wished they had one anyway, the weather being so hot in Nazareth.

I mean, they were having themselves a nice little praise service. Jesus has them eating out of his calloused hand. He is the hometown boy who reads so well. All might have gone well … if Jesus had not preached. Here’s how he begins his sermon …

“Isaiah says that God is coming to deliver the faithful. Well, I tell you that the day of the Lord’s appearing is today. Now let’s see, when was the last time that God came to us? It was during the time of the great prophet Elijah. There had to be many famished Jewish women because of a great food shortage in the land. But look what happened. God’s prophet gave food to none of those hungry Jewish women -- only to a Gentile, pagan woman.”

That surprise move in Jesus’ sermon reminds me of what happened with the impeccably dressed crowd at our National Cathedral two Tuesdays ago, gathered as they were to hear a nice little meditation from a diminutive bishop on how it would be lovely if we could all just … get along.

That’s’ what they thought they’d hear (at least) -- a sweet message from a bespectacled woman who weighs no more than 100, maybe 110 pounds;

a woman who looks s lot like your grandmother.

Well, it was all going along fine in the stone cathedral built to look 400 years older than it is. People were nearly dozing when the preacher needlessly quoted Jesus on the subject of mercy. The same subject Jesus had brought up in his very first sermon, mind you.

You know, when Jesus brought up the subject of mercy in the context of folks on the margins, you could see a special kind of quiet come over the previously adoring, hometown congregation; you could see them look down at their shoelaces.

But, hey, Jesus was just warming up. He continued -- “And there had to be lots of people suffering from various illnesses during the time of the prophet Elisha, but God’s prophet healed none of them. Only one, a Syrian Army officer, was healed.”

I’m sure that “Syrian Army officer” meant exactly the same thing then in Israel that it means today. Anyway, Matthew says that, “When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger.

They rose up and ran him up to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff.”

Wow, I’ve had a few negative reactions to some of my sermons over the years, but never has anybody in the congregation tried to lynch me because of my preaching!

Why did the congregation in Nazareth become so upset? What turned their initial adoration in to murderous rage?

Well, put yourself in their place. As I said, they didn’t have any expectations that anything would actually change in their country. They were content to come together for worship, have someone open their scriptures and remind them that, while despots were running their country, God still loved these little downtrodden people.

I mean, before the Romans took over, Israel was a respected nation state. People remembered the mighty prophet, Moses, and how they were governed once by the intrepid King, David.

Circumstances being what they were, all they wanted was to be reminded that God had been good to them once or twice and that God still loved them best.

The last thing they expected (or wanted to be reminded of) was that God actually loves people who don’t happen to have their “chosen people” pedigree.

But look, this young upstart, Jesus, had the temerity to remind them that God behaved in ways they did not expect, in ways that they did not appreciate.

That day in Nazareth, the young, hometown boy-preacher, reminded the faithful that during the days of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, God had worked the other side of the street. God had worked compassionate wonders, not for the chosen people, but for pagan outsiders.

God had shown mercy to those who did NOT worship Israel’s God. And who among us appreciates being reminded that God has behaved in ways that are different from our expectations in the past, and might do so again?

Who would want to hear that God was free, sovereign, and likely to show mercy on those whom God would show mercy, to love whomever God chose to love?

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner said the following, ”Judaism is a rather simple religion that is based on two profound articles of faith: There is only one God, [and] You are not it.”

That’s pretty much what the good folk at Nazareth experienced in Jesus’s sermon. They arrived at the synagogue that day with their conceptions of God firmly in place. But then the preacher, using nothing but scripture, corrected, expanded, critiqued, enriched their idea of who God is and what God was up to.

Well, God’s concerns are bigger than any congregation, even this one. And Jesus, being the good Jew that he was, reminded the faithful that it’s not like the Syrians have their God, and we have our patron God who runs errands just for us.

No, there was only one God.

“Our God,” according to Jesus, was doing God’s best to look after everyone else, as well. Our God is, therefore, not our tamed pet. Well, they didn’t like a bit of it.

They wanted something else and they let him know it, big-time, holding him by his feet over the edge of the Nazareen bluff.

Sadly, we are often tempted to cut bleeding-heart Jesus down to our size, to substitute other more manageable “messiahs” for the true one.

I mean, look, the majority of American evangelicals have pretty much thrown Jesus and his message of mercy for the stranger and the outcast, over the cliff. They’ve gone back home afterward and are having one grand old party now without him, right.

Look, they don’t need him and his pitiful gospel of mercy any more. They’ve got the all three branches of the government under absolute control. They can do whatever they please.

Jesus once asked a question of his disciples, “What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” And then he refined that a little: “What shall a man gain if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (Matthew 16:26 KJV)

Remember that one? Jesus knows these people. He knows where he stands with them and what they might trade-him-in for like he was a used Chevy.

These “pious” folk believe in America first. Jesus is a distant third, maybe. We know they have no regard for the actual message of Jesus because of their universal repudiation of Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde’s sermon appealing respectfully for mercy.

If the gospel of Jesus is anything, it is a deep, heart-focused, resounding call for “mercy.” It goes all the way back to Jesus’s parable of the prodigal son, the mercy he showed on the woman taken in adultery, the healing offered to the daughter of the Syrophoenician woman, all the way back to what he said that got him nearly killed after his very first sermon at Nazareth.

We know these Christians today are unfamiliar with the essential message of Jesus because they are still calling for Bishop Budde to be deported, still calling her “Satan,” and the most self-damning statement so far came from a deacon named, Ben Garrett, at Refuge Church in Ogden, Utah, who said that Bishop Mariann had committed the “sin of … empathy.”

I’m not making this up. A deacon at a church called, R-E-F-U-G-E, accused her of the *sin of empathy*.

Well, if your first allegiance is not to the God of the Bible but is instead to a 34 times convicted felon, serial sexual predator, who wants to make life impossible for gay people, trans people, and hard-working immigrants who pay more in taxes than his billionaire buddies, then your world is upside down and empathy; empathy, therefore, becomes a sin. Why not?

Fellow feeling? Why it’s the blackest sin imaginable. Be careful of empathy.

I mean, it smacks so much of love, and we all know what love can lead to.

Yes, and mercy, the thing Bishop Budde was angling for -- why that’s even worse. You know, if I was told there was a word tattooed to the right shoulder of that scoundrel from Nazareth named, Jesus and I was asked to guess what it was, I wouldn’t hesitate to guess that it is MERCY. Mercy enclosed in a great big red heart.

I will close with a story I’ve had in my illustration file for decades. Time to pull it out. It is amazing what a heart filled with natural mercy might do in a pinch. Just listen to this ….

Arnold Perrin of Union, Maine, writes the following, “When I think of mercy, I think of the time my granddaughter Beth and I went out in the paddle boat and rescued bees. The insects had tried to fly across the lake and, unable to go any further, had fallen exhausted into the water, pollen leaching from their sacs. It was a mild day with Beth beside me, laughing at the adventure, the paddle wheel making its pleasant, repetitive sound, and the scooped bees drying on the deck.

I also think of the roadside zoo in Florida where Beth spied a baby rabbit that had been placed in the snake’s cage to be eaten. “No way!” she said, and she opened the lid, tucked the rabbit under her coat, and brought him all the way back to Maine, where he grew fat and happy.

And I think of a scene on the evening news that brought tears to my eyes. At a Ku Klux Klan rally, some anti-Klan protesters had pushed down a skinhead wearing a Confederate-flag t-shirt. They were kicking him when suddenly a black teenager threw herself across the body of the downed man and told them to stop. And they did. I wonder if the incident brought about any changes in the skinhead. What was going through his mind when the angry protesters backed away from his bruised body and he lay for a moment under the protection of his rescuer’s [black skin]?

What, indeed, was he, is he thinking?

Amen