Famous First Words

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I read lots of bedtime stories to my grandsons over the Christmas holiday. I couldn’t help but notice how many children’s stories begin with the words, “Once upon a time.” “Once upon a time there were three little pigs.” “Once upon a time there were four little rabbits; their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton Tail and Peter.” “Once upon a time there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy.”

We’re talking today about famous first words. Consider the way many stories in classic literature begin. Charles Dickens begins The Tale of Two Cities with the words, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Or the opening line in Moby Dick, “Call me Ishmael,” or Tolstoy’s opening words in Anna Karenina, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Think of the famous first words in movies, like the memorable first words in Star Wars, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.” Or the opening lyrics from The Sound of Music, “The hills are alive with the sound of music.” Or the first line from the movie Goodfellas, “As far back as I can remember I’ve always wanted to be a gangster.”

President Roosevelt began his speech to a joint session of Congress after the bombing of Pearl Harbor with the immortal words, “A day which will live in infamy,” or Neil Armstrong’s first words after stepping on the moon, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,” or the opening line Samuel Morse typed by telegraph, “What Hath God Wrought?” (Numbers 23:23).

I don’t know if Jesus’ first words could be considered famous, but they are indeed memorable. They set the tone for his entire ministry. I’ll get to Jesus’ indelible one-liner in a moment, but first, let me set the context.

Jesus travels the countryside of Galilee (Luke 4:14) preaching the gospel, and along the way, visits his hometown. Nazareth is the quintessential small town. It has no strategic importance, and its population is estimated to be fewer than 200 people. That may explain why it is never mentioned in antiquity apart from these four New Testament gospels. It’s a one-convenience store, one stop sign kind of town.

Jesus joins in worship at the Nazarene synagogue on the
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Sabbath, as was his custom. A typical synagogue service would include a reading from the Torah and another from the prophets. Jesus is given the prophet Isaiah to read. It’s unclear whether Jesus selects this reading or it is chosen for him. He reads Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” and sits down in good rabbinic fashion to preach the sermon. Given all the publicity that has followed Jesus into town, everybody is eager to hear what Jesus will say next.

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). It may not seem like much, but these words explode in people’s ears. “Today” is the first word out of Jesus’ mouth. Today is the day and now is the time.

Jesus isn’t like many politicians who make campaign promises at the beginning of their term that may or may not be fulfilled while they are in office. Jesus is speaking about something promised long ago which is now being realized. Jesus is saying, in effect, this salvation is now being fulfilled in your ears.

Jesus could have called it quits right here and salvaged the situation. Instead, he presses the issue by citing two examples from the book of Kings about God’s mercy to outsiders. God sends the prophet Elijah to rescue a poor Gentile woman and his understudy, Elisha, to heal a foreign military officer.

Jesus’ hometown is expecting a little preferential treatment. Instead, he goes to outsiders; Gentiles, no less. This sets everyone’s teeth on edge.

Jesus could have utilized a more effective rhetorical strategy to inaugurate his ministry. I was taught in homiletics classes to build rapport with your congregation before you start preaching the tough stuff. Save the inflammatory rhetoric until you have established trust with people. There is none of that here. No sir! Jesus’ first words prompt these hometown folks to ask, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

Jesus can read their minds. He knows they are miffed that he went first to neighboring towns like Capernaum rather than starting in Nazareth. It was standard operating procedure in the Middle East to give your first allegiance to family and your second obligation to your town or village. That’s why he says, “Doubtless you will quote the proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum” (Luke 4:23).

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punches them in the gut with Isaiah and hits them right between the eyes with Kings. That’s why mob rule breaks out. They carry Jesus out of town to throw this upstart preacher over the cliff. Somehow, Jesus eludes their grasp and lives to see another day.

Matthew and Mark place this story in the middle portion of their gospels. Luke, however, positions it at the beginning. He regards this story as representative of Jesus’ ministry. Luke puts this story first because he regards it as a game changer, a tone setter, a deal breaker.

Jesus centers his ministry in the ancient words of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Jesus repeatedly talks about his mission to the poor. Jesus shows throughout his ministry a decided preference for the poor. There is no inherent virtue in being poor. Rather, the poor epitomize the most vulnerable. That’s why the orphan, widow and alien (stranger) in the Old Testament are singled out for special protection.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus opens his Beatitudes, “for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Jesus seeks to bless those impoverished in spirit as well as those lacking financial resources. “Come unto me all you who are burdened and heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has…sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18).

I received a letter from Congressman Wolf this week addressed to religious leaders, urging us to advocate for religious freedom. There are 193 countries in the world today. According to a comprehensive Pew Forum study, Christians are being persecuted in 131 of these countries worldwide. Christians are being harassed and discriminated against in matters of employment, imprisoned, tortured and even executed for their faith. Every five minutes, a Christian is martyred in the world. I refer you to our church website, where we have made available the Pew Forum study as well as the press release from Congressman Wolf, and an editorial from a pastoral colleague with two rabbis in the Wall Street Journal, dated December 21st.

We don’t hear much about the persecution of Christians in mainstream media today. Western media is ignoring this atrocity. This isn’t altogether surprising, given the anti-Christian bias among many Western elites today. Yet, what is even more alarming is the silence of the Western church. Some of you are in a position to do something about this under-
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reporting or can bring it to the attention of those who can do something about it. Jesus calls us to give voice to the voiceless. Pray for the persecuted church. Support mission agencies specializing in giving aid to persecuted Christians.

As for the so-what portion of this sermon, let’s return once again to the inaugural words of Jesus: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today is the day and now is the time.

The famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody was preaching to an overflow crowd at the Illinois Street Church on Sunday, October 8, 1871. His sermon that evening focused on the question Pilate asked: “What should I do then with Jesus who is called Christ?” (22:27). He invited the congregation to take this passage home and think it over. He urged them to return the following Sunday to decide what to do with this Jesus of Nazareth.

The song leader came forward to lead the closing hymn. How ironic that they sang the hymn, “Today the Savior Calls.” They never finished the hymn. The roar of fire engines outside drowned out their singing. The city was on fire. It burned that Sunday through the following Wednesday. The church burned to the ground and much of the surrounding neighborhood. One thousand people perished in the Chicago fire of 1871, including many in that Illinois Street church.

Moody’s deep regret was allowing people a week to think it over. Years later, Moody reflected on that night: “I have never seen the congregation since and never will meet those people again until I meet them in another world. But I want to tell you of one lesson I learned that night, which I have never forgotten and that is, when I preach, to press Christ upon the people then and there, and try to bring them to a decision on the spot…I have asked God many times to forgive me for telling people that night to take a week to think it over.”

Today is the day and now is the time. Some of you keep saying tomorrow. I’ll give myself to Jesus tomorrow after I’ve lived my life—after I’ve settled down, taken a new job, married, raised my children or retired.

Nike’s slogan comes to mind: “Yesterday you said tomorrow.” Today is all we’ve got. Don’t put off following Jesus until tomorrow. Tomorrow holds no guarantee. “I tell you,” Paul writes in Corinthians, “Now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

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