

# Jesus Begins

Scripture text: Luke 4:14-30

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When I was very young I had a vague awareness of someone called “The President.” If you really gave me a moment I could hear some early echoes in my memory of someone called Eisenhower because the radio voices were always mentioning “blah de blah blah-dee blah PRESIDENT EISENHOWER TODAY blah de blah.” I have a very early image in my mind of a round shiny head and the world’s biggest smile—at least the biggest one I’d ever seen.

I was five when President Kennedy started his term, and had turned seven a couple of months before he was assassinated in 1963. I remember grief and sadness, and no adults in my household or at school wanting to talk much about presidents, so my memories of President Johnson are surprisingly vague. I really have no recollection of the start of his only full term in 1965.

So, the first presidential inauguration ceremony I really remember is that of Richard Milhous Nixon in 1969. I know that today his image is indelibly tarnished by everything we learned about his words and actions later in his term, and I expect that

most of you have no recollection of what he said in his inaugural address. But you should, because the words are transcendent and the theme was “searching for peace.”

He said that “the greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker”—and that this honor was within our country’s reach. He said America was “rich in goods, but ragged in spirit; reaching with magnificent precision for the moon, but falling into raucous discord on earth.” He observed that for “a crisis of the spirit, we need an answer of the spirit. And to find that answer, we need only look within ourselves.”

And, he observed in the idiom of his time that “no man can be fully free while his neighbor is not. To go forward at all is to go forward together. This means black and white together, as one nation, not two. The laws have caught up with our conscience...as all are born equal in dignity before God, all are born equal in dignity before man.”\*

On this weekend when our nation honors the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I won’t pretend that Mr. Nixon stood arm in arm with Dr. King.

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\* “Nixon’s Promise to Search for Peace,” transcript of Inaugural Address, The New York Times, Jan. 21, 1969, p. 21.

But in that moment, on the steps of the United States Capitol in 1969, the words hang in the air as a challenge and as an expression of something bigger than one man. They captivate a crowd longing for transcendence. And they signal that something has just changed.

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That is the power of an inaugural moment. It is a signal that something has changed. There is no going back to what was reality just a few minutes ago.

As the moment passes, it is clear that a shift has taken place. From the portraits on every wall to the topics that are on the table for discussion—there's a complete change of direction.

Of course, reality did set in for Mr. Nixon and for the people who had installed him in the nation's highest office. All the poetry and pomp of January 20, 1969 receded. Promises to speak quietly so that dialog could take place devolved by the time of his re-election campaign into the tricks and tactics that led to his resignation. And maybe the disappointment and the anger of that time flowed from the memory of his inspiring address.

The hope we feel...the aspirations we grasp...from the words we hear in an inaugural address may simply be a case of projecting

our own hopes and aspirations onto the speaker's words. And of course, that can lead to misunderstandings and even anger.

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Now, it's no accident of careless language or labeling that people call today's Gospel passage "Jesus' inaugural sermon." In many ways Luke wants us to see this as Jesus' big debut.

It is not the first time that Jesus has spoken. He has been out in the countryside, touring Galilee, visiting with people, and attending the local synagogue in the village every Sabbath day. In Luke's telling it has enough parallels to a political campaign that I wouldn't be surprised to know that Jesus had been kissing babies and sampling the hummus at local festivals.

But here, in Nazareth, the mood is different. Jesus is home. He knows the people, he knows the village, like the back of his hand. The people have known him since his parents brought him home as an infant from his naming in Jerusalem. This is truly a proud moment for them as their boy reads from the scroll of Isaiah.

And yet these wonderful words of call, the words we ourselves heard just a month ago during Advent...somehow take a dark turn. Everyone was okay with Jesus saying the prophecy of Isaiah had come true right then and there, in him. They were okay with it—until they weren't.

And they are not because of the conclusion that Jesus draws: if this is God's year to act, it's God's year to act for hometown villages and out-of-towners. It's God's year to act for Galileans and those big-city people in Jerusalem. It's God's year to act for Judeans and for actual foreigners living in places like Sidon and Syria.

The idea that God's love is for everyone, and that THEY are NOT "everyone" ... it's all too much. This inaugural word is almost enough for Jesus to lose his life.

The rage comes when the villagers realize that God's love is not intended to reach "just us" ... God's love works to achieve justice.

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Words that are pleasing, until they are not. Words that bring unity, or rage. Words like that mark times of change.

God knows how many words have been pouring out and flowing around us in these unsettled times. Some of those words have given us hope, some have confused us, some have raised feelings of bitterness or frustration or rage—and sometimes that has happened all at once. We wait, and not at all patiently, for the moment when things will turn, things will change.

In our waiting is the danger of projection...what we can think of as "hearing what we wish to hear", not what is being said. In our waiting is an anxiety that the moment will be derailed, and change

will be put off, and the moments we have suffered will extend into the distant future.

In these days ahead, we need to be listening for a word that comes true in this place, in our lives...a word that lets us know things have changed. We need to make space for the historical marker that heralds that change, and that extends beyond our own personal needs.

If we don't want to be like the elders of Nazareth throwing Jesus off a cliff, we need to accept the possibility that the word we hear extends beyond "just us." That the love of God is not for "just us." That the justice of God is not for "just us." That the work of God in the world is not directed toward "just us."

God's word goes beyond "just us."

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Change is coming and we know we need it. In this time when people are doing strange and unrecognizable things we know we need change.

May we recognize God's call for universal justice: justice for the impoverished. Justice for the captive. Justice for the blind and the burdened and the battered. Justice for those we love and those who are strangers to us. Justice.

And may we hear the invitation to join Jesus in the journey that begins today. In His name.