

## “Worship Interrupted”

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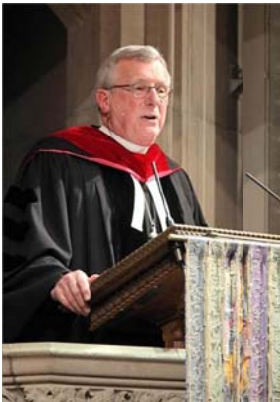
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Luke 4:14-21 = divine interruptions

Some years ago at a large downtown church, the minister had just read the Scripture lesson from the lectern. In the pause after, the preacher was in the process of climbing into the pulpit when suddenly a man, a stranger, stood up in the balcony. “I have a word from the LORD.” he said in a resounding voice heard across the startled congregation. Heads turned and eyes craned to see the source of this interruption. “I have a word from the LORD!” he said again.



Whatever “word from the LORD” this gentleman brought no one would ever know, for ushers bounded up the stairs like gazelles. Before the man could say another word, he was escorted down the stairs and out of the building.



So it is in our congregations. Sunday after Sunday countless preachers pause between the text and the sermon, spread out their sermon notes, clear their throats and start to preach, saying, or at least implying, that they have a word from the LORD. Yet nobody tenses. No heads swivel in alarm. No ushers suddenly leap into action. No, instead congregants crease their bulletins, check their watches, and settle in for the sermon.

A sermon? Yes. But not necessarily a word from the LORD? Yet, isn't that what a sermon is supposed to be?

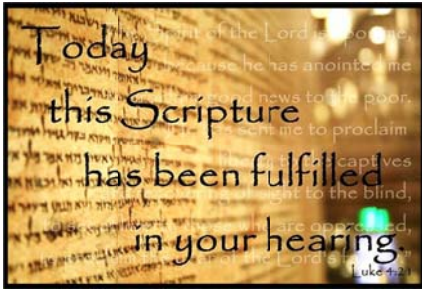
Surely it was this way that sabbath in Nazareth. The congregants were not expecting a word from God from the lips of the local boy made good. Jesus was offering a word from the LORD rather than the expected sermon ~ with similar results.



Jesus doesn't start out preaching a new revelation. So many others in his day and ours try to superimpose their new word from the LORD, their new revelation, to displace God's previous words. Jesus isn't bringing a new word

from God so much as Jesus connects himself directly with the scriptures, the already established and long accepted words from God.

Indeed, at first the gathered town thinks it just a regular sermon. Nobody tenses. No heads swivel in alarm. No ushers leap into action. Bulletins hadn't been invented yet, instead they find something else to occupy their hands, they check the angle of the sun for the time, and settle in for an ordinary, everyday sermon.



At first they praise him for his words none of which challenged anyone's expectations. Then something really unexpected happened. When Jesus sits down and says: **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."**

When he says he fulfills prophecy, that he has a new word from God drawn directly from God's very word to Isaiah, that's when heads turn and eyes crane to see the source of this interruption. When he claims the prophetic mantle, you could almost feel their anger and rejection bubbling up to fill the synagogue ~ so murderously angry they formed a mob to kill him.

I used to take the family on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July up to tailgate at a small airport just North of Dallas. We would get a bucket of chicken and would have to get there hours early to get a good parking spot. Afternoon and Evening there would be antique planes taking off and doing acrobatics: a P-51 Mustang or two, a biplane, a Spitfire and one of only 3 or 4 flightworthy B-29's left.



At sundown the lightshow would start. Everyone would tune their radios to a certain FM station. turn it up so everyone could hear it, and the music would start while the fireworks show proceeded.

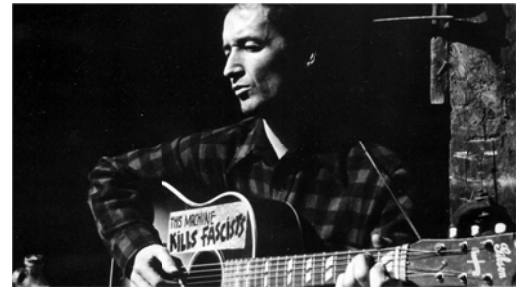
One of the mainstays every year was Bruce Springsteen's *"Born In The USA."* Thought to be a patriotic song until one year someone listened to the words and lo and behold discovered it was critical of the United States. It was a great song but a protest song about the Vietnam War and how the veterans were treated on return.



Ever after at the airport fireworks show they only play the accompaniment without the words.

The reason the words of *"Born In The USA"* were removed there and at many other venues is obvious: they do not fit with patriotic expectations. So just blanked out. Like Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth, we get angry if our expectations are popped.

**S**ongs: We bury the lyrics we don't like. Take *"This Land Is Your Land"* by Woody Guthrie. It has become another patriotic favorite. I've been asked to sing it at patriotic celebrations. But it has two of the original verses always left out, one about hunger and another criticizing private property. You never hear the original verses 6 and 4:



One Sunday morning in the shadow of the steeple  
By the Relief Office I saw my people ~  
As they stood hungry, I stood there asking  
Is this land made for you and me?

As I went walking I saw a sign there  
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."  
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,  
That side was made for you and me.

The reason these verses are left out is the same as Jesus' preaching stirring up the Nazareth crowd: it has an unexpected Jubilee message just like the one from Isaiah which Jesus read:



"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 Jubilee year of the Lord's favor."

**S**ometimes we have to be hit up the side of the head with a 2X4 to recognize a word from the LORD. On the morning of September 11, 2001, Rowan





Williams, not yet Archbishop of Canterbury, was gathered with a group of clergy in a recording studio near the World Trade Center in New York City. The group was taping a religious broadcast on the theme of spirituality. He states in his eyewitness book on 9/11 with classic understatement: “We were interrupted.”



God’s word to Rowan Williams on that dreadful day was about the danger and power of religious language: how religious language could inspire us to great good, but how it even more could be manipulated to provoke persons to unimaginable evil.<sup>2</sup>

He and other religious directors were about to tape several hours of words about God when the disaster struck and their planned words were reduced to silence from an overwhelming, true word from the LORD. They found themselves receiving a much greater word from God than they could have ever imagined. The original mundane Sabbath sermon they had planned was cancelled, and a much deeper word from the LORD took its place.

**W**e don’t want to kill Jesus, but are we really that different from the Sabbath crowd in Nazareth. We are fully capable of just blanking out messages we don’t care to receive, overlooking words from the LORD that don’t fit our preconceptions. We’re good at closing our eyes to unpleasant truths and rationalizing away unwelcome messages from God.



We are just as allergic to God’s challenging us as were Jesus’ neighbors in Nazareth. We much prefer the soft, soothing words with all the calls to commitment and responsibility removed.

Yet there are God’s words all around us, if we are but capable of hearing them. We have to silence our preconceptions, stifle our expectations. We have to open our hearts. We need to recognize a word from God when it hits us in the face, controlling our skepticism and bridling any anger.

We need to be open to God’s interruptions.

<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Pulpit Resource* 32.1 for 1/25/2004, pp. 18-19

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Writing in the dust: After September 11* (Eerdmans, 2002) pp. 4-5