

Note: This is an expanded version of the sermon I preached at Sutton's Bay Congregational Church with an additional scripture passage, some revisions, and a different ending.

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John 3:14-21 & Luke 4:14-30

The Potter's House, UCC
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Have you ever had one of those reoccurring dreams? You know, one of those dreams that is played over and over again? Well I have one. I've had it for about three years now. But it's not really a dream; it's more like a re-occurring nightmare. Here's how it goes: I'm in this future world and everything there is controlled by this Contemporary-Christian Cultural Conspiracy. All that's hurtful and damaging and misguided about the way people practice the Christian faith has somehow become the norm. And this Contemporary Christian Culture is ruling the world. They are running everything. It's like all the worst parts of Christianity get mixed with consumer capitalism, self-help pop-psychology, nationalism, and a sense of Manifest Destiny. And it's all rolled up into this regime that controls everything. It's kind of like living in a fascist state, but everyone shakes your hand and says they're really glad to see you.

In my dream I feel helpless and alone. I'm frustrated – no, I'm angry – because everyone else is part of this conspiracy, part of this ruling Contemporary Christian Culture. And the conspiracy is *everywhere*: it's inside the churches and out in the culture. It looks like no expression of Christianity I've ever known. It feels like The Good News has been strip-mined, and all that's left is Bad News. And not just Bad News, but Bad News that's been dressed in slick marketing logos to dish out promises of personal comfort and satisfaction. And that's why I feel so helpless and alone and frustrated and angry. There's nothing I can do. Nobody gets it but me. Nobody can see The Conspiracy because they're all part of it. I want to tell them, "This is *not* how it's supposed to be." I want to shout, "WAKE UP! LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE!" I want to scream, "GO BACK AND READ THE BOOK!"

Well, that's the dream. And for three years, that's how it ends. But last Sunday night the dream changed. I suddenly find myself backstage in a giant convention hall. I immediately realize it's the global convocation of this Contemporary Christian Culture Government Ruling Thing. I'm standing backstage, feeling *very* uncomfortable, when this producer guy mistakes me for the keynote preacher. He tells me, "You're on in three minutes." And I'm horrified! My first instinct is to run, but I quickly realize this could be my chance, my golden opportunity. I

frantically scribble out a sermon outline with some scattered notes. The first scripture passage that comes to mind – the only one – is the story of Jesus reading the scroll at the temple. So I decide to run with it. I'm going to take all my anger and frustration and hopelessness and funnel it into my sermon. After a few short moments, the producer guy comes to get me. He shakes my hand and tells me he's really glad to see me. He then leads me out onto the stage and straight to the pulpit. I put my sermon notes down, stare out at the enormous crowd, and then begin to speak in that bellowing, confident, preacher's voice that ministers love to use:

This is the Good News! Jesus stands up in the synagogue and reads from the scroll of Isaiah, "The Spirit of God is upon me, who has anointed me to bring good news to those who are poor, who has sent me to proclaim release to those who are captive and recovery of sight to those who are blind, to let those who are oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

This is not about you. This is about Jesus. This story is God's mission statement. It's explains exactly why God is interacting with the world. And this is the *decisive* statement of God's purpose because it is being spoken by Jesus; the One who fully incarnates God. So this is not about you.

This is not about you falling on your knees and claiming a personal Lord and Savior. This is about the people who fall to their knees because their legs have given out; it's about the people who fall to their knees because the weight of depression or the burden of hopelessness have drained them of any ability to get up. This is not about you.

This is about the city you live in. In fact, this is about the whole world. This is about *community*. Salvation has nothing to do with your eternal self-interest. Salvation has nothing to do with building your own little security pod that will jettison you to heaven when your body gives out. Salvation is about God's reconciling work. It's about God's reconciling work that mends and heals the profound separation of God's people – a separation that has turned individuals into strangers and strangers into enemies. Salvation is about welcoming those who are isolated into a community. Salvation is about freeing those who are made captive by systems of injustice that keep down their ability to make a living wage, while simultaneously twisting their minds to desire the material good that falsely promise a freedom that they can only possess through self-destructive means.

This is the decisive statement of God's purpose in the world, spoken by the incarnation of God. And guess what? It's not about you. It's about something God is doing. And God's gonna keep doing it whether or not you are a part of it. God's plan for reorienting the world does not depend on your personal faith decision.

This personalization of salvation – this individualization of Christianity – is not the result of faithful interpretation of our scriptures. It is not faithful adherence to our faith tradition. It is not the clear application of our reason. Nor is it some divine revelation from the Spirit of God.

This personalization of salvation is the result of the twisting and distorting these things. It's ripping select scripture passages out of context for your personal use. What's your favorite one? How about John 3:16? You can all recite this, I'm sure. How does the King James Version put it? "For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." That's the text your Contemporary Christian Culture holds up as God's Mission Statement. But you are, my friends, quite wrong.

I've watched you use this passage to beat individuals to their knees, to manipulate others into accepting a personal Lord and Savior. And every time you wield this passage I choke – I gag really, because it's surrounded by the garbage of personal piety and manipulation that it make Jesus sound like he's riding this escalator back and forth from heaven to knock on the door of some teenager's heart to see if he can get in.

Let me tell you something. This weak, robe wearing, door-knocking Jesus who would be thwarted by the indecision of a fickle fourteen-year old is no savior. That's not what the story is about. Read the whole thing. Read what comes before it. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up, that who ever believes in that one may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

It's not about your personal salvation; it's about God's redemption of the People Israel. Moses didn't go person to person asking them to look into their hearts, did he? And then what comes after your favorite scripture memory verse? "Indeed, God did not send the Child into the world to condemn the world, but in order that through the Child the world might be saved"(3:17).

And the next verse? "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved the night rather than the day because their deeds were evil" (3:19). The light has come into the world and to expose evil practices. And this light is blinding, penetrating, all-

encompassing. It's not some keychain-flashlight that Jesus carries with him so he can search your heart to see if you have any evil or sin tucked away in the nooks and crannies of your soul. No, this is a worldwide beam of Justice and Mercy. It's a light that exposes atrocities and evils people have accepted as normal.

And this personal-penlight Jesus? He's no savior either. God sent Jesus to reorient *the world*. Remember the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert? Remember what the devil says in the third temptation? The devil uses *scripture* to tempt Jesus into saving himself. The devil says to Jesus, 'If you are who you say you are, then throw yourself down from the top of the Temple. The *scriptures* say God's angels will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' The devil uses *scripture* to tempt Jesus to make God's purposes all about his own personal salvation. The devil uses scripture to manipulate Jesus. So how is that different from the way you use John 3:16 to manipulate others? Aren't they the same?

Think about it. This temptation takes place right *before* Jesus proclaims God's purpose for his life and ministry: "The Spirit of God is upon me, who has appointed me to bring good news to those who are poor, who has sent me to proclaim release to those who are captive and recovery of sight to those who are blind, to let those who are oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

You want to memorize something? Memorize that! Put "Luke 4:18-19" on a T-shirt! Put that on the sign you hold up at football games! Put that on your bumper-stickered mini-van!

And then, after Jesus reads this proclamation of God's purpose, he sits down and says, "This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus lets them know that *he* is the Anointed One that God has sent and for whom they have been waiting. But do they hear him? Nope. All of Jesus' hometown pals miss the *content* – *God's plan* – and hear only that Jesus – one of their own – is the Savior God has sent. And that's the mistake. They twist and distort this situation – *the proclamation of God's love for all people* – and focus only their own self-interest.

But Jesus anticipates this: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Healer, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the thing we have heard you did in Capernaum.'" They retort, "If you, the promised savior is one of us, then do some of those miracles and the things we've heard you do for others. If you're going to do great works for complete strangers, then let's see what you can do for you very own people."

That's when Jesus reminds them that it's not about them. Remember when there was a great drought back in Elijah's day? Remember how that famine swept over the land, and how many hungry widows there were in Israel? But what happened? The prophet Elijah wasn't sent to any of them, but to the town of Zarephath, to a *Gentile* widow, to a non-Jew, to an outsider, in the area of Sidon, a great distance away. See? It's not about you. It's bigger than that.

Now when Jesus' hometown friends hear this they get mad. They're filled with rage. They grab Jesus and try to hurl him off a cliff. Is that the appropriate response? Is that the appropriate response to the proclamation of God's purpose? Are you going to a, "What's in it for me?" or will you ask, "How can I help?" Luke's story of Jesus – The Gospel of Jesus Christ According to Luke – is filled with stories of people who make the right response. And the rest of the story is nothing more than an invitation to join Jesus in carrying out God's purpose; to bring release, to help in restoration, to join in recovery, to help offer freedom. It's nothing less than a complete reorientation of the world.

So this is not about you. This is about what God is doing. Think about it! Which takes more faith? Believing God can save you and offer you personal fulfillment and comfort? Or believing that God can reorient the whole world from one of hate, greed, fear, and selfish personal gain, to one ruled by peace and justice and compassion for the least of these? Which will you choose? Which takes more faith? To believe that God can save you? Or to believe that God is going to save the whole world and wants *you* to help? What's it going to be? That's the only decision you need to make.

And with that, I stepped back from the pulpit. It was deathly silent. I took a sip of water as I panned the crowd. I wanted to see if anyone got it, if any of my words made sense, if anything touched them, if anything moved them in any way, shape, or form. And there I stood in that awkward silent moment for what seemed an eternity. And then, in that strange way that often happens in dreams, I was no longer standing in front of this evil worldwide convention of the Contemporary Christian Culture Conspiracy. I looked out and realized I that was here, at The Potter's House, with my church family. And it looked like there was some big party planned. And everyone I know and care about and love is here too. I see them all, and my family, my friend Jim out in San Francisco, and even grandmother who has long since passed on. But when I look carefully, I see there are others -- people I don't recognize, people I've never

seen before. And I notice that they don't look like they're doing so well. They look sad, like they are hurting, or lost, or have been forgotten or marginalized.

And just then I look out and see, that sitting in the very back row, is me – the older 'me.' And I'm sitting there with a stunned and confused look on my face. It's the 'me' who fell for it hook, line and sinker. It's the 'me' who forgot the content of the message, and misunderstood the purpose. Though I never tried to convert anyone, I realized I was equally at fault. I'm wearing my big black pulpit robe and stole, I'm holding a few three-ring binders stuffed with meeting minutes to review, blueprints for a giant new church building, committee flowcharts, 12 different budgets, and membership rolls that need to be cleaned. And I begin to cry.

I think of the preaching contests in seminary that taught us, 'It's all about you.' I think of a Grand Rapids church that my colleague Todd serves and how the church council voted to spend \$20,000 on brochures and announcements for his first Sunday -- \$20,000 in a city with an enormous homeless population. [They obviously know how life-changing brochures can be.] I think about the church in Rhode Island that Robin served, and how – after spending \$18,000 on landscaping and building a gorgeous brick handicapped access ramp - that they couldn't find it in their budget to make the doors *into* the building accessible. That was too much. And I remember how Robin was the only one of the 14 who thought it was a crime, and how the others thought Robin was off base.

And as I'm standing there with tears running down my cheeks, aware of my own complicity, everyone here stands up and yells: "WELCOME HOME!" And I feel glad to be home. Thanks be to God.