

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor William R. White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org)



## The Sermon Text — Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “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 year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

### SERMON

In a sense all catastrophe’s have two sets of aftershocks. The first, the physical aftershocks, are terrifying, but then comes the other aftershocks – the questioning. How did it happen? “Why did it happen?” If it was a fire, was it started by the act of humans? Is global warming playing a part in creating the inordinate amount of hurricanes or heavy rains? Finally, Should we work God into the equation when we speak of tsunamis, floods, fires or earthquakes? If the answer to this question is yes, then we open ourselves to a number of loony statements and proposals.

The first one to hit the airwaves after the most recent earthquake came from a television pastor, Pat Robertson, who suggested that we charge the devastation to a slave revolt that took place 319 years ago. He called it a pack with the devil, and proposed that God was punishing the island.

Most of us have heard many a tragedy assigned to God. It happens at the time of death. “It must have been his time.” Or if it was a child, “God wanted an angel for his choir.”

The first time I heard God associated with a disaster was in high school when the Mississippi River had spilled over its banks and put much of French Island, a section of La Crosse that bounded the river, under water. People wondered why God was so angry, why God could allow such a disaster. That was the topic in many places, including the barber shop where guys in Viroqua hung out. At this barber shop you paid a buck for the hair cut and received

commentary on political and social events free from Homer, the barber. One day when I was in to level my flat-top Homer was pontificating about the compassion of God. “How can God allow all those people to lose their homes and their life savings?”

A man waiting his turn challenged Homer and said, “The land where those houses with wet basements sit absorbed floods for hundreds of year until developers drained the wetlands and people built on the flood plain. It’s hard to blame God for human stupidity.” That man immediately became my favorite theologian.

Years later, in another state, a friend and I were attending a wake for a boy killed in a car accident. We expressed our condolences to the mother of the lad who sobbed, “I don’t understand why God wanted my Joey enough to have him killed, I really don’t.”

As we walked away my friend, who didn’t attend worship whispered to me, “No assist for God in this one. Joey was driving 100 miles an hour on a crooked road.”

Writing in a recent issue of the New York Times David Brooks said about Haiti, “This is not a natural disaster story. This is a poverty story. It’s a story about poorly constructed buildings, bad infrastructure and terrible public services.” I would hasten to say, it is not a story about God, it is a story about how humans build and live in the world God created.

The mystery of suffering, the mystery of natural disasters remains just that, a mystery. Engineers tell us that New Orleans was a disaster that was waiting to happen when Katrina struck. Actions have consequences, and when people build houses on bluffs overlooking an ocean, or build houses in the midst of forests, or cement buildings without the proper steel enforcements, the consequences can easily become a human disaster. The cause of an earthquake or a tidal wave may be a mystery, but violating the laws of nature, is not.

It is obviously of little comfort to the thousands of people who are suffering on the island of Haiti that earthquakes are a mystery. That leads us to the next conclusion, that disasters create opportunities for us to make contact with members of the human community we have never met. Disasters shorten the distance between us and people throughout the world. For Christians the response is simple. We care and we respond because reaching out to people in need is a part of our life’s mission statement.

In this morning’s story Jesus went to church. It is only worth mentioning because we are told that church attendance is down in many places. Many say that they don’t worship because they don’t get anything out of it. I have no idea if Jesus got something significant out of worship, but my hunch is that it wasn’t an issue. We know

that Jesus was quite critical of the church structure of the day. We know that in spite of his criticism he continued to attend. He did so because that is where people of faith gathered and still gather regardless of the content of the worship.

By now you've probably heard of the mother who knocked on her son's bedroom and yelled, "Son, it's time to get up or you'll be late for church."

The son replied, "I don't want to go."

The Mother said, "Give me two reasons why you don't want to go to church"

The son replied, "Because church is full of hypocrites and they don't like me. Now give me two reasons why I should go."

The mother answered, "Because you are 35 years old and you're the pastor."

In this case Jesus was 30 or 31, not the pastor, and he was in church because that is where we go to connect with other believers.

Jesus, who was visiting his hometown, was invited to address the people at worship. He arose, selected a scroll from the book of Isaiah and read:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me: To preach good news to the poor; proclaim release to the captives,*

*Recovery of sight to the blind, To let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

He then said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your presence."

By placing this story at the very beginning of the public ministry of Jesus Luke is announcing that this is the mission statement of Jesus. It is his platform. Understand this statement and you will understand his ministry.

In 2004 Time magazine published an interview with Bob Dole after he lost the election for president, and was in the process of retiring.

"What are you up to these days?" Answer: "A lot of traveling, a little speaking around the country. Thinking about doing a real book, a growing-up-in-America-type book. I probably won't run for anything again, so I can tell the truth now."

Was he joking? Perhaps not. When I say that these words were the platform of Jesus I'm not saying they were identical to a political platform. For starters Jesus did his platform. He really did heal the sick. You can look it up. He really did restore sight to the blind. And he proclaimed good news to all who needed it.

Your personal platform or mission statement might be different, but certainly the mission statement of this church ought to reflect the platform of Jesus. Our congregation's platform ought to include: announcing good news to all. I recently talked to a woman who now attends a large church on the Westside of Madison. "I attend there because several of my friends invited me and then picked me up," she told me. Her friends did not announce good news, but they took her to a place where good news was announced. It was a part of their mission statement.

Our Mission Statement ought to include a variety of ways of providing help for people in need: feeding the hungry, welcoming the homeless, providing aid for those who have suffered from disasters. This past week, your initial offering, through your church, was \$6,700. With your dollars and the dollars of other ELCA people (a total of more than \$1.6 million up to this time, you have helped develop two water purification systems to bring clean water to 25,000 people. In addition you provided emergency food and medical supplies to thousands and blankets and tents to shelter 10,000 people who are homeless. There is more, but this gives you an idea that your church takes serious the platform of Jesus. I know many of you had already responded to the Haiti earthquake through the Red Cross, or now through the Clinton/Bush program.

In a couple of weeks a Bethel Work group will be making our tenth trip to Puerto Rico. This year, most of our work will be at the Synod's Camp, laying cement, patching roofs, fixing steps, in addition to painting two houses of members of Bethel Lutheran in Dorado.

What the platform of Jesus reminds us is that our goal in life cannot only be to better ourselves. If we are connected to God, God will immediately begin to connect us to others. It is pretty clear, however, that people prefer to keep religion private, that is, about them and God alone. Don't let that happen to you.

If we were to continue to read the story that was our gospel today we would discover it has a curious ending. After Jesus sits and tells people that the words of scripture are being fulfilled in their presence Luke tells us, "And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth."

At this point, people are saying, "Isn't this a nice story. Such nice words, and such a happy ending. But it wasn't the ending. Jesus went on to say that the poor who needed good news, the captives and blind include people who were Israel's enemies. He reminded them that Elijah did not receive sanctuary in Israel, but was forced to go into foreign territory, and that the only leper who was healed was a Syrian.

And the people exploded! "They rose up and put him out of the city and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong," but this time he walked away.

People wanted religious faith to be about them. They preferred to stay at home. Jesus turned them outward. And he still does. Nurture your faith, and then share it. When you do great things will happen. Amen. © 2010