



But Wait, It Gets Better

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
23 January 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Word made flesh. Amen.

I have so much to share with you this day. I know I preached just two Sundays ago, but today is like coming back to my hometown and sharing all the news with you after being away for a time. First, over the days between Christmas and New Year's Day, my family went on an overnight vacation to Chicago. Some of you know that I was able to make my first pilgrimage to the Starbucks Roastery in Chicago. Five Floors of Coffee Ecstasy. Floor #1 was the RESERVE Coffee Bar and copper lined scooping bar with indoor fireplace and coffee roasting schedule with \$145 leather Starbucks aprons and half pounds of Costa Rican cheerfulness costing a paltry \$24.00/half pound. Starbucks clothing and coffee mugs and playing cards and water bottles – a fantastical feast for the eyes. But wait, it gets better. Floor #2 was designed as an Italian bakery – where a passion for coffee and a passion for bread collaborate together to embody the true spirit of the coffee bean. But wait, it gets better. Floor #3 offers you the opportunity to immerse yourself in the art, science, and theatre of coffee. Coffee flights, coffee creations, exploratory brewing methods, nitro-infused gelato, and espresso classics prepare your senses for the ultimate coffee drinking experience. But wait, it gets better. On the Fourth floor – a cocktail bar featuring innovative coffee and tea-forward cocktails and the exclusive barrel-aged coffee bar. But wait, it gets better. Floor #5 the roof deck provides unique views of Chicago and the Roastery below. It was almost too much for the senses. My wife chose not to wait in the 45-minute line outside – my children held on until the joyous moment, when the doorman looked at us and said, “okay, it is your turn. “Woohoo!”

Also, our oldest child is driving. Lord, that will be a whole sermon in itself. But prayers are appreciated. I have so much more to share with you, but I will save it for another time. We have the words of Jesus today to excite and inspire us and I need to move on. And so I will use the same line...but wait, it gets better.

Quick summary – Jesus comes home today. Like Brett Farve returning to Lambeau, Jesus comes home to Nazareth. No doubt, his mother Mary tells the entire village Jesus is coming home for a visit. Dismissing the questions about where Jesus has been, Mary must be excited to share the news of her son's upcoming visit. She last saw him at the wedding in Cana, she tells her neighbor. “Remember, where my son turned water into wine.” You can imagine the neighbor being gracious though she has heard the story too many times already. Funny, that Mary does not tell her neighbor about the rumor that her son, Jesus has been in the wilderness, finding himself for the last 40 days. And so Jesus comes home. Mary is thrilled to show off her son. And on the Sabbath, they went to church. And Mary was thrilled that Jesus decided to read from the scroll of Isaiah. And when he stood up to read, he read this prophecy in Isaiah, chapter 61: 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. Mary was pleased, the rabbi leading worship was pleased, the village was pleased. But wait, it gets better. Then Jesus said to the gathered worshippers, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your presence.” Or to put it another way, “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.” And Mary stopped smiling and so did many of the villagers, and the rabbi, and now they are angry. Ok – one more time, But wait, it gets better. If you keep reading the villagers are so angry, they try to throw Jesus off a cliff. But that is for another day.

Here is what I love. Most of us hear readings from the Bible like this...For we judge between the plate that is unclean and the plate that is clean, saying first, if the plate is clean, then you shall have dessert. But of the unclean plate, the laws are these: If you have eaten most of your meat, and two bites of your peas with



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each bite consisting of not less than three peas each, or in total six peas, eaten where I can see, and you have also eaten enough of your potatoes to fill two forks, both forkfuls eaten where I can see, then you shall have dessert. But if you eat a lesser number of peas, and yet you eat the potatoes, still you shall not have dessert; and if you eat the peas, yet leave the potatoes uneaten, you shall not have dessert, no, not even a small portion thereof. And if you try to deceive by moving the potatoes or peas around with a fork, that it may appear you have eaten what you have not, you will fall into iniquity. And I will know, and you shall have no dessert. And if you are seated in your high chair, or in a chair such as a greater person might use, keep your legs and feet below you as they were. Neither raise up your knees, nor place your feet upon the table, for that is an abomination to me. Yes, even when you have an interesting bandage to show, your feet upon the table are an abomination, and worthy of rebuke. Drink your milk as it is given you, neither use on it any utensils, nor fork, nor knife, nor spoon, for that is not what they are for; if you will dip your blocks in the milk, and lick it off, you will be sent away. When you have drunk, let the empty cup then remain upon the table, and do not bite it upon its edge and by your teeth hold it to your face in order to make noises in it sounding like a duck: for you will be sent away. When you chew your food, keep your mouth closed until you have swallowed, and do not open it to show your brother or your sister what is within; I say to you, do not so, even if your brother or your sister has done the same to you. Eat your food only; do not eat that which is not food; neither seize the table between your jaws, nor use the raiment of the table to wipe your lips. I say again to you, do not touch it, but leave it as it is. And though your stick of carrot does indeed resemble a marker, draw not with it upon the table, even in pretend, for we do not do that, that is why. And though the pieces of broccoli are very like small trees, do not stand them upright to make a forest, because we do not do that, that is why. Here ends the reading.

Never does the reading sink into your bones. It does not often excite you or inspire you or change your worldview or cause you to challenge everything you believe so that you may learn and live in a new way. Yet that is exactly what Jesus offers us this day.

Here is what is actually happening when Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah. It's a Sabbath day soon after Jesus's baptism and subsequent temptation in the wilderness. "Filled with the power of the Spirit," Jesus returns to his hometown, enters the synagogue he has likely attended since boyhood, and stands up (as is the custom) to read from the Prophets. He asks for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, unrolls it, finds the passage he wants, and reads aloud. By the time he's finished reading (the Gospel of Luke tells us), every eye in the synagogue is fixed on him. Luke offers us this reading scene as the inaugural act of Jesus's ministry. An act in which he proclaims his identity, his purpose, and his vocation. What I love about the scene is that Jesus chooses to reveal the meaning of his life and work through the beloved and well-worn words of Scripture. Words his audience has heard a thousand times. Words no doubt rich with communal memory and meaning, but also words in danger of losing their power through over-familiarity. It's not as if the Son of God is incapable of penning a new and shiny mission statement; he is the Incarnate Word himself. But he doesn't improvise; he opens the book and makes the old words of the tradition his own: "God 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." As if to say: the Word *lives*, here and now. It is organic, it breathes, it moves in fresh and revolutionary ways. The Word of God is neither dull nor dead. It is *alive*. *As if to say, but wait, it gets better. You just heard me tell you I am the One you have been waiting for. God's promised, chosen Messiah has come to you this day. How lucky you are!*



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And many of the worshippers that day and most of us most of the time, after hearing the reading think to ourselves. Okay, great, now what did I need from the grocery store again. I wonder how long the sermon will be today. Well never fear, Pastor Chris is here.

Which brings me to this moment...The pastor was invited into a Sunday School classroom one Sunday morning. "Let me ask you a question," said the preacher. "Who broke down the walls of Jericho?" A red-haired, freckle-faced boy shot his hand up. "I didn't do it, honest reverend!" The teacher came to the boy's defense. "This boy is being honest and I believe him. I really don't think he did it." The minister left the room feeling not too well. In the hall was the chair of the worship committee. The minister told the whole story. "The teacher was right," said the chairperson. "I've known both the teacher and the boy for years and neither of them would do such a thing." Now the minister felt really unwell. That night at the church council meeting, the whole sad story was retold. "Don't get upset, reverend," said the chair of the board. "No sense in making a fuss about it. We'll just pay for the damage to the wall and charge it to maintenance."

Today Jesus announces he is with us. "Now is the acceptable time", the Apostle Paul writes, "see, now is the day of your salvation!" It is God's promise to us. Jesus is the living, breathing presence of God among us. God's very own tagline for us. "but wait, it gets better." When you read God's Word. When you hear God's Word. When you speak and sing God's Word. When you allow the Word of God to come alive in you. There you will find the Word of God alive in you. Hearing once again God's promise to each of us, no matter where you are – no matter what you have done – no matter how hopeless you feel...in the presence of Jesus, God is telling us again and again, "but wait, it gets better." Thanks be to God. Amen.