

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
4th Sunday after Epiphany
1 February 2009

First Sermons

Several weeks before I graduated from seminary, I was invited back to my home parish in Brooklyn, NY to preach what was then called a “trial sermon.” My family had been members of this parish for several generations and I was well known. I had grown from the impish little red-headed acolyte who liked to tease the girls into what the elderly ladies called “a fine young man.” I was going home. Now it was generally assumed, without asking me of course, that I would return after graduation to be a curate and to learn how to be a priest from the grand old master, my rector. That’s how things were done. But I had some bad news for my rector and the congregation. I was not coming back. I accepted an offer from another church across the river in Manhattan.

This set the tone for my first sermon.

I mean to tell you, the sermon was a stem winder: full of fire and smoke, vinegar and oh, you know... I thought it was one of my best. I pulled out all of the stops. The congregation and my rector, however, received it with disappointing indifference. Later that night St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church burned to the ground. Some said faulty wiring was to blame and other said it was the sermon preached earlier.

In this morning’s gospel lesson we see Jesus beginning his public ministry by reading the lesson and preaching his first sermon in the synagogue. Mark tells us the sermon was fairly good and well received. His message and teaching had “authority.”

I would suggest to you this morning that Jesus began his ministry on three simple points. These points became the central goals of his ministry to those who heard it in that small synagogue in Capernaum and to those who sit in a comfortable, cozy church in Florissant:

- Be fully aware of the time in which you live. So often we are bombarded with confusing and contradictory meanings about the times in which we live. Listen carefully; decide slowly in determining the full significant of all that you hear.
- We should always be aware of the sovereignty of God. As Psalm 111 says:

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
those who act accordingly have a good understanding,
His praise endures for ever.*

- We should be aware of the good news of Jesus Christ: that God sent Jesus to save us from ourselves. Therefore we should have the greatest confidence in the love of God.

Basing our actions on these three—the time, the sovereignty and the gospel—we are called to change our minds and hearts so we may meet any issue of our times with confidence and hope.

Oh yes, lucky for me the people of St. Augustine's are a forgiving people, even though after almost 39 years they have yet to invite me back to preach.