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Date: January 9, 2022
Sermon: "Kerygma"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: John 1:1-4, 14; Philippians 2:6-8

John 1:1-4

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Philippians 2:6-8

*Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Sermon

"Kerygma"

David Johnson Rowe

The medium is the message

Jesus is the medium

Jesus is the message

Jesus is the Kerygma

(p.75, from *My Jesus*)

With our worship services online, I get to watch myself on the computer screen, my iPhone, even the big TV screen. My goodness, I look old. I watched myself last Sunday, slowly hobbling up the aisle, barely making it up the stairs. But when I got into the pulpit, I was strong, forceful, on top of my game!

I know my stuff better than ever! Age does that. Some stuff gets old. Some stuff gets better.

What got me thinking about this is baseball. I realized the other day if I started my baseball career now, at my age, I'd be really good! I'd be slow as molasses; but thanks to all those years of watching baseball, thanks to my own years as a coach, thanks to modern technology that slows every aspect of the game—every pitch, every hit, every catch in slow motion—to be studied . . . well, as a result, I see things now, I know things now, I understand things now that we baseball players never imagined in my heyday. I'd be much better now. It might take me longer to run to first base, but I'd get there a lot more often.

That's what I feel about religion in general, God in particular, and Jesus specifically. I know stuff now. I think about stuff now that never crossed my little mind when I started out in 1968, nor after 10 years in 1978, nor after 20 in 1988.

My mother died in 1988. After the funeral, a woman in my Church, the Head Deacon, she told me, "You'll never do a funeral the same way again." And she was right. By then, I'd been a pastor for 20 years. I'd done 600 funerals already. I was a bit of a hotshot in my profession at that time. Yet, I was just starting to learn, just starting to wake up to real life.

You might wonder how that could be. Well, to become a pastor, you go to seminary for three years, and they teach you mostly book stuff. Then you have to get ordained by a denomination; and the denomination, they mostly teach you denomination stuff. Once you become pastor of a Church at the age of 23 or so, there's a lot of administrative stuff. But if you stick with it long enough, life intervenes. Every single aspect of life, the good, the bad, and the ugly, everything that could possibly happen in human experience, sooner or later it happens on your watch as a pastor.

That makes you think. That makes you pray. That makes you reevaluate, take stock, change your mind. And, dig deeper, and reaffirm, recommit. Everything gets looked at harder and, I dare say, comes out clearer. All of this is a way-too-lengthy introduction to my sermon. I'm saying that, with religion in general, God in particular, and Jesus specifically, as with my baseball analogy, I've learned a lot over a long time, and that explains why I'm stronger *in* the pulpit, even while it takes longer for me to walk *to* the pulpit.

The reason I wrote that book, *My Jesus*, is that I see more clearly, I understand more fully, I appreciate more deeply, I believe more strongly. I know, and I know flat-out better than when I was a hotshot. Because when you're a hotshot,

you're too busy *being* a hotshot. But when you're over the hill, you get busy figuring out what's important.

Jesus has been around for two thousand years. That's long enough to be used, abused, exploited, warped, maligned, needed, believed, followed, opposed, misrepresented, blamed, and worshipped.

Jesus has been used as a marketing tool, a political tool, a military tool. The Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust, the Thirty Years' War, the Hundred Years' War, all done in large part or in whole . . . in Jesus's name, for his benefit, in his defense, as an excuse.

In every one of my 53 years in ministry, and every one of the 11 churches I've served since my first job as a youth pastor in Brooklyn, I have had to deal with people hurt and broken by awful things done and said in Jesus's name. Disease. Accidents. Birth defects. Sports injuries. Marriage woes. Job woes. National disasters. Societal disasters. Natural disasters. All blamed on Jesus.

But not my Jesus. I spent so many years inserting into conversations with people, "But that's not my Jesus . . ." "But that's not our Church . . ." "But that's not the Christianity we teach . . ." "But that's not the God we believe in . . ." "But that's not what Jesus said . . ." Always trying to bring people back to the Jesus I know.

That's why I wrote the book. To be able to say like an old baseball player, "I finally know how to play this game." Or, as a Christian, "I know Jesus. Read my book."

The jumping-off point for today's sermon is Chapter 4 from the book, "Jesus *KERYGMA*." "Kerygma" is the Greek word for "proclamation." When Christianity was getting started, they had to sort out what was important; what should they teach? What should they preach? What is Christianity's main message? What deserves to be proclaimed? What do you need to hear? What's our Kerygma? I end that chapter this way: "In the Golden age of TV in Hollywood, Marshall McLuhan stated, "The medium is the message." True enough. Jesus is the medium. Jesus is the message. Jesus is the "Kerygma."

In that chapter, I look at the "must" teachings of Jesus, but I mean "must" in a positive way. We often use "must" as a demand, a requirement, a "you'd better do this or else" threat. I'm using "must" the way we do when we're excited about something, and we say to friends, "You *must* try this restaurant . . ." "You *must* read this book . . ." "You *must* see this movie . . ." Or the one I'm famous for, "You *must* visit Prague."

In other words, there are things worth your time. There are things you'll be glad to know. Like the Beatitudes from the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus's "must" list of how to live a blessed life. Be gentle, be peaceful, be humble. Then there is the mystical Incarnation, John 1, one of our Scriptures for today, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That's John's Christmas explanation.

Incarnation means "taking on flesh, becoming human, being one with us," a simple choice on God's part to make it so, a tougher choice on our part to believe it so, that God would love us enough to know us, to become us, to be with us. That's the mark of a true friend, isn't it? The mark of a real family.

And, John 3:16, the whole Bible in a nutshell. "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

There it is, on a silver platter: God's love, Jesus's purpose, our benefit laid out in 25 words. There it is, the paradoxical mystery of Good Friday and Easter, the Cross and the Resurrection, death and life in 25 words. God does the hard work: the loving and the sending. We do the blessed work: the believing and the living.

You may have your own "must" Jesus verses, some story, some teaching, some encounter that is like a light coming on, an "aha" moment when you really get what Jesus is about. And your "must verses" are as good as mine if they light you up. And the reason things are lit up is to show the way, brighten the path.

The final part of today's sermon I'm taking straight from the book, beginning at page 116. "When I asked Alida what Bible story most captures the essential Jesus for her, her "must" Jesus verse, she said, "The Bent-over Woman." It's from Luke 13:10-17. "On the Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then Jesus put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. But some were angry because he had healed on the Sabbath." (Luke 13:10-17)

"Each healing and miracle story by Jesus has a "wow!" factor, but often their real force is in presaging something far greater. Jesus is never "just" calming a storm, feeding a multitude, driving out demons, or healing a woman with a long history of bleeding. Each says, look deeper, think bigger.

Think through the elements of this story. Sabbath. Crippled woman. Jesus. Healing. Criticism. Wonder.

With the "Blue laws" long gone from America, which kept Sunday special for generations, people cannot grasp how holy, sacred, set apart the Sabbath used to be, and is meant to be. By definition, by God's command, it is meant to be different from every other day in every way. In that light, look at what Jesus does. First, he notices a woman "bent over, crippled by a spirit for 18 years." My guess is that, when first stricken, people in town felt bad for her. Sympathy may have lasted for weeks. After a while, people's attention moved on to other needs, other people. After 18 years she was part of the scenery. In another miracle in Mark 8 a blind man, partially healed, tells Jesus that he "sees people, but they look like trees walking." That was life for this woman in her village, a bent-over tree walking. A person, yes. But really just part of the scenery. No one took notice.

Jesus noticed.

Jesus called her forward. Throughout his life he called people forward. Out of crowds, out of hiding, out of shame, out of work, out of routine, out of prejudice, out of ego. He finds you where you are and calls you forward.

What was her problem? This is a preacher's paradise. Her bent back and inability to stand up tall can be a fill-in for every form of burden. Crushed under the weight of . . . burdened by . . . weighed upon . . . debt, worries, baggage, sin

Luke says the bent-over woman was crippled by a spirit. With no known obvious cause, like falling off a donkey, ancient times assumed evil spirits at work, or a bad karma. You got what you deserve either because you deserve it, or your parents deserve you to deserve it. Jesus rejects that thinking elsewhere, but here ignores it. What matters is his Kerygma. He will have a story happen, then draw out a lesson that should keep people thinking, and doing, until he returns. Until then, we must ask how this miracle speaks to us in our day amidst our issues.

Think of people bent over for such a long time, no way to stand up tall, they can't face the day head on, the weight of whatever is too heavy, and now they are hardly noticed. Is that a thing in our world?

It doesn't take long before we are in hard political territory. Student debt. Medical costs. Refugees. Immigrants. Racism. Poor schools. Opioid crisis. Addictions, plural. Aging population. Terrorism, domestic and foreign. Endless war. All these issues and a dozen more cripple us.

And here's Jesus saying, "Come here. I need you to stand up tall. He says that to a woman, to a hopeless case, on the Sabbath, interrupting worship, creating

a scene, breaking the law, drawing condemnation from the authorities. Just another day at the office for Jesus

The lists of Jesus's stories and miracles and sayings are his lived kerygma. They show us the way."

(Rowe, David Johnson. "My Jesus." 2021. Pp. 117-120)

That's why I wrote this book. That's why I'm preaching 10 sermons on it, spread over a year. That's why our weekly Bible Study is studying all the Bible verses I use. That's why our 60-day Advent Devotional focused on Jesus-centered verses. That's why I'm working hard, pushing hard, to get the book into a thousand homes. There are Church members who have given money so we can send gift copies to hundreds of young adults connected to this Church family; and each comes with a cover letter that explains the urgency and vitality of Jesus in our time.

The Jesus who stands with us, beside us, inside us, against everything that besets the human condition, and with everything that lifts up the human condition. That's what I've learned as I've gotten older. The Jesus that I was shy about early in my career, the Jesus I kept at arm's length, or under wraps—is actually something people want.

In my early days, I ran coffee houses for three years as part of my ministry. In a brazen attempt to be relevant, my coffee houses were safe spaces for every imaginable, even unimaginable, expression.

We were wildly successful; kids loved the freedom. They'd sing their songs, read their poems, shout their slogans, and play their music. Anybody and everybody got up to tell what they thought. After a while a group of them came up to me and said, "How come you never get up and tell us what you think? You never tell us what's important to you."

"Like what?" I asked, a bit surprised. "Like Jesus. That's cool, you know." They knew Jesus was good for them before I did.

Ah! The lament of age: "If I knew then what I know now . . . "

Consider my book my chance to make up for lost time.

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, "The Church's One Foundation," No. 272 in your Hymnal.

*The Church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;*

*she is his new creation
by water and the Word.
From heav'n he came and sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her,
and for her life he died.*

*Elect from ev'ry nation,
yet one o'er all the earth;
her charter of salvation:
one Lord, one faith, one birth.
One holy name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses,
with ev'ry grace endued.*

*The Church shall never perish.
Her dear Lord to defend,
to guide, sustain, and cherish,
is with her to the end.
Tho' there be those that hate her
and strive to see her fail,
against both foe and traitor
she ever shall prevail.*

*Tho' with a scornful wonder
the world sees her oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder,
by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping;
their cry goes up, "How long?"
and soon the night of weeping
shall be the morn of song.*

*'Mid toil and tribulation
and tumult of her war
she waits the consummation
of peace forevermore
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great Church victorious
shall be the Church at rest.*