

## Jesus' Playbook

*[a sermon preached on 25 January, 1998, at the Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church, Denver, by Co-pastor Gilbert Horn, based on I Corinthians 12.12-31a and Luke 4.14-21]*

Anybody who's spent much time poking around in the New Testament will have noticed its fondness for metaphors. In fact, the greatest single problem with biblical literalism, whether from fundamentalists or the Jesus Seminar, is trying to figure out what to do with the metaphors. They come in all varieties: agricultural, mercantile, military, familial, physiological, political and, of course, athletic.

Both of our lessons today are heavily metaphoric. Very little technical, theological language. Therefore, easier to understand than lots of things in the Bible. Also, more suggestive of other ways to go in preaching them. Today, as we know, there is only one way any preacher hereabouts who is not living in a cave should go with them. Hence my title, "Jesus' Playbook."

Who of us has not seen a testimonial in which some burly football player, down on one knee, proclaims that "Jesus is my quarterback"? I used to scoff at that. But it's as good a metaphor as most of the stuff Paul uses about "running the race." Good, because everyone knows what he means. Jesus is calling the plays. Maybe we can run them, and maybe we can't. There are blocks and sacks and fumbles and interceptions. But every schoolchild knows who the quarterback is, what he does, and what we're supposed to do if we're on the team. So it's a wonderful metaphor. Not snazzy enough to wind up in a creed as yet – but who knows?

Now, some may object to football as a metaphor for the Christian life. Columnist George Will complains that it combines the worst two things about America: "Football is violence punctuated by committee meetings." Be that as it may, the test is whether a metaphor communicates. We can push any of them too far. Ignatius Loyola reminded us that they all "hobble on three legs."

So, as tough as testimonials are for Presbyterians, let us all drop to one knee – metaphorically, of course – and take Jesus as our quarterback. This Gospel, where he outlines his ministry there in the synagogue of his own hometown, is a close as we'll come to a playbook for the Savior of the world. Let's see how it works itself out in terms of our life and times.

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."** His mother would have been so proud! Jesus had to have learned that at her knee. It is so reflective of her response to the angel's announcement of his birth as to be a summary of the Magnificat. So in her honor, let's call this play the "Hail Mary!"

Oh, you've heard of that! So you know how it works. Jesus gets the snap. Everybody runs like mad. Jesus throws long, closes his eyes, and prays. But what does that have to do with "good news to the poor"?

Just this: "the poor" is all of us. We're all included in that first play. How? Because there is some poor part of each of us that needs good news. I'm convinced that Jesus was not just talking about the economically poor, although they were certainly included. Look at the rest of the Gospel, and you'll see the "poorest" folk in there tended to have more of the world's goods than they knew what to do with: the rich young man, the lawyer, Simon the Pharisee. Their poverty lay in their obsessiveness, their self-righteousness, their elitism. Where does our poverty lie? I can't answer for you, nor you for me, but Jesus' first play is meant to get good news to the "poor" parts of all of us.

This is Ecumenical Sunday, so called. It is the last day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, a time the church uses to recall what is common to us all, but also where each of us is impoverished relative to the unity for which Jesus prayed. Our poverty can be corporate as well as individual.

I am never so grateful for the worldwide church as when I see who even other Presbyterians are and how enthusiastically they worship and work around the globe. They are on fire for the Gospel. We might mistake them for Baptists, or even Pentecostals. They may not possess our theological clarity about everything, but God knows we could use some of their spiritual passion. At the very least, the good news of which Jesus spoke shows us what we have to learn from each other, to give to each other. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." You didn't hear that, and I didn't say it!

**"He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives."** I don't know whether we're talking here about a draw play, a trap, or just some really good interference, but Jesus intends to free us up. Again, some might try to get out from under this one by assuming he's talking just about the folks in prison. They're obviously included. What is not so obvious is what "release" might look like for them. But if this play is for you and me, it is the "captive" parts of us that Jesus wants to release.

The prisons of addiction, enmity and fear are not foreign to any of us. I suspect, however, we are far more likely to spot their symptoms more easily in others than in ourselves. Maybe we have developed a rich loathing for the traps others succumb to, not realizing they reflect precisely what we hate about ourselves. Perhaps the footwork here looks like a double reverse. First, the log in our own eye has to go. Then we can see the splinter in our neighbor's eye. And only then can we see that she is our sister.

Speaking of seeing, **"He has sent me to proclaim...recovery of sight to the blind."** Is this getting easier or harder? We're obviously not talking about white canes and seeing eye dogs. We are talking about why a quarterback sneak works time and time again. Or a fake. You and I see what we expect to see, what we are trained to see, what we are looking for. And *vice versa*.

All of our shortsightedness, our bias and prejudice, stem from this blindness. A good football player has always to expect the unexpected, to look for the unusual, to anticipate that things are not going to be as they appear or go according to preconceptions. A follower of Jesus needs to do the same. "As wise as serpents and as innocent as doves," Jesus describes it elsewhere. If everybody else is looking left, you look right. If their eyes are up watching for a pass, you look for the run. If they're all saying, "He looks guilty as sin," you say, "I don't have enough information to form a judgment yet."

Oh, what a blessing it would be if the next space shuttle took all the pollsters to the moon! That is a bigoted statement, of course, because it is a glittering generalization. But I see very little difference between making determinations by anonymous polling and giving ourselves over to mob rule. It cancels thoughtful investigation and reasoned debate. It is the blind leading the blind. And, as Jesus said, when that happens, we all wind up in the ditch.

**"He has sent me...to let the oppressed go free."** Can you see where this is taking us? Jesus is pushing us to think "outside the box," as the expression goes. This item from his playbook has not to do with a formation or a pattern, but with how we play the game. Another way to talk about it would be to say, "Let's play a no-penalty game." The reason I put that obnoxious quote from a noted football coach there at the top of your bulletin is that we are all tempted, in the heat of action, to forsake principle and rule, to try to pull something illegal in hopes it won't be noticed.

Oppression happens only when the rules are bent or broken. We talk all the time about a "level playing field." But the more people talk about it, the more I wonder what they really want. The playing field *is* level. Creation *is* good. God *is* love. The rules are the same for everyone. Oppression happens only when we ignore that, take unfair advantage, cut corners, sell short, water down the product, kick the other guy's ... you get my point.

So Jesus reminds us, as though we didn't know it already, that the rules are in place, spelled out clearly, and that we are not really playing the game if we don't observe them all the time. Moreover, if things are going as they should, it is not the other guy who finally is oppressed when we ignore them, but ourselves. The penalty is lodged against us. We are the guilty, the ones who are violating the goodness of Creation. By causing others pain and dislocation, it is finally we who are hurt.

There's that word you've all been waiting for: "finally." This is Jesus' last point, and it is mine as well. **"He has sent me ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** Jesus is calling a time out. That's what this verse means. It refers to the year of Jubilee, which was to be a time when all scores were nullified, all bets canceled, all the little pieces of the giant Monopoly game we've turned life into got put back in the box.

Finally, the clock runs out. But even before then, when things get too hot and heavy, the clock can be stopped, and people can huddle up, reconnoiter, take stock, and catch their

collective breath. I like to think of Sunday mornings around here as a time for that, when we do things together we don't do any other time. Sing, pray, reflect, maybe weep a little, doze off during the sermon. Our workaday clock stops, and we make a conscious effort to think about what life would be like if Jesus really was our quarterback.

Because, do you know what, that is what he promised, there at the beginning of his ministry. **"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."** Today, and not just because it's Superbowl XXXII. Today is everyday we hear his voice, calling the plays, and do all we can to run them wherever we are.

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