**“The Fierce Urgency of…Today”** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Third Sunday after Epiphany The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 19, Like 4:14-21 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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It’s being called the *sermon heard ‘round the world.*

By now you have likely heard or read about the sermon that the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, Mariann Edgar Budde, preached this past Tuesday morning at Washington’s National Cathedral. I’ll comment on the content of her sermon in a moment, but first we need to set the scene:

An interfaith service has been held at the cathedral on the day after the Inauguration since 1993, but this year’s ceremony was different, focusing on the need for national unity. It was planned in August, well ahead of the general election, and cathedral dean Randall Hollerith [said](https://religionnews.com/2025/01/14/at-trumps-inauguration-religious-allies-and-new-faces-to-offer-prayers/) when it was announced in October, *“This will not be a service for a new administration.”*

Prayers were offered by a racially and religiously diverse group of clerics and touched on many different human needs.

Unity was also the theme of Budde’s sermon, which was based on sections of the Sermon on the Mount.

*“We have gathered this morning to pray for unity as a people and a nation, not for agreement ­­— political or otherwise — but for the kind of unity that fosters community across diversity and division, a unity that serves the common good,”* she said, in a gentle, clear way.

*“Unity is not partisan; rather, unity is a way of being with one another. It encompasses and respects, teaches us to hold multiple experiences as valid; it enables us to genuinely care for one another, even when we disagree.”*

Jesus, Budde added, *“exhorts us to love not only our neighbors, but to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to be merciful as God is merciful; to forgive others who forgive us.”*

She decried *“the culture of contempt in this country which threatens to destroy us,”* and identified three foundations for national unity: *a respect for the dignity of all, honesty, and humility.*

*“In public discourse, honoring each other’s dignity means refusing to mock or discount or demonize those with whom we differ,”* she said, *“we all have our blind spots. We are most dangerous to ourselves and others when without a doubt we are absolutely right and someone else is absolutely wrong.”*

So far, so good. I encourage you to listen to her sermon in its entirety at your convenience if you haven’t heard it (National Public Radio, npr.org, has a direct link to it, as does every other media outlet.

It’s only 14 minutes long and there isn’t anything in it that isn’t heard in countless thousands of Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and some Evangelical churches across the country on any given Sunday.

The part, however, that has gotten all of the media buzz and social media commentary—both pro and con--is the last three or four minutes of the sermon where she speaks directly to President Trump. Again, context is important:

Standing in the storied Canterbury Pulpit above the president on Tuesday, Bishop Mariann E. Budde, according to the New York Times, was a little afraid.

The leader of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, she had planned for months to preach on three elements of unity — *dignity, honesty and humility.* But just 24 hours earlier, she had watched President Trump proclaim his agenda from the inauguration stage, as conservative Christians anointed him with prayer.

He was no longer just campaigning — he was governing, she thought. His nascent presidency and flurry of executive orders had so far encountered little resistance. She felt called to add a fourth element to her sermon: *A plea for mercy, on behalf of everyone who is scared by the ways he has threatened to wield his power.*

*“I had a feeling that there were people watching what was happening and wondering, Was anyone going to say anything?”* she explained quietly in an interview on Tuesday night. *“Was anyone going to say anything about the turn the country’s taking?”*

So, she took a breath, and [spoke](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/21/us/politics/trump-bishop.html) in the same gentle, clear way:

*“Millions have put their trust in you,”* Budde [said](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwwaEuDeqM8). *“As you said yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of the loving touch of God. In the name of our God, have mercy on the people in our country who are scared now.”*

Budde mentioned gay, lesbian and transgender children, people who pick crops and clean office buildings. *“They may not be citizens or have proper documents; the vast majority are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogues, gurdwara, and temples.*

*“Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger. We were all strangers in this land. May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being … speak truth to one another in love, walk humbly with God, for the Good of all people, of all people in this nation and the world,”* she said.

President Trump, seated seven feet below and some 40 feet to her right, made eye contact. One representation of American Christianity began speaking to another, and the most powerful man in the world was arrested by the words of a silver-haired female bishop in the pulpit. Until he turned away.

For everyone watching, the vastness of Washington National Cathedral compressed, in one stunning moment, into a sudden intimacy. And with it, all the existential fights not simply of politics, *but of morality itself.*

The Canterbury Pulpit confronted the bully pulpit on the greatest possible stage.

Many Christian leaders applauded her, but the people who thought she was most amazing were non-Christians for whom she represented what they always hope Christians might be, but they too rarely see.

Let’s think about these things in terms of our text this morning from Luke, chapter 4, because something very similar is taking place.

Jesus, you see, has returned home to Nazareth and made his way to the synagogue, as is his custom. The hometown boy who’s done well has come home to preach, and the synagogue is no doubt packed—Luke says his fame has spread throughout the countryside. People love a winner, and they love a spectacle. This crowd knows Jesus and he knows them, so they turn out to hear him preach—this favorite son, back in the synagogue, back to the friendly and familiar, back to a day that used to be. They expect to experience exactly what they have experienced in the past; they are backing into the future with their eyes on what’s behind. They crowd into the synagogue to relive the glorious days of what used to be.

Luke makes the preliminaries brief and hurries us into the synagogue. Once inside, with worship under way, Jesus stands up to read. As he ascends the steps, the attendant draws aside the silk curtain containing the sacred manuscripts and hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Whether the Isaiah scroll was handed to Jesus by prearrangement or by providence we do not know. The synagogue had no official readers; any competent male member could read one of the lessons. This is the only place in the Bible where Jesus is portrayed as reading.

And so, with the scroll in his hand, Jesus purposely and meticulously finds this passage: *“The spirit of the Lord is upon me for 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.”*

When Jesus is done reading, he follows established custom and sits down to preach. With the eyes of the hometown crowd fixed on him, the first word out of his mouth is *“Today.”* Today the hopes contained in this passage are realized in your hearing. *Today* he has come to release and restore, to reach and redeem. He is the anointed herald who has come to mediate God’s final deliverance. Jesus takes this oft-repeated promise from Isaiah and brings it into *nowness.*

You know, sometimes it is dangerous to do things *now*—just ask Mariann Edgar Budde. If Jesus had said *someday, tomorrow, after a while, by and by, or in the not-too-distant future,* he could have pacified the people in their disappointment about where and to whom he has been sent to minister. But when he says *today*—this is my mission and my ministry—he draws a line in the sand and provokes a response.

Did all of the good, religious people of Nazareth respond favorably to Jesus’ message? *No.*

Why? Because Jesus spoke directly to the congregation saying that God loved widows and those stricken with leprosy — *implying that his neighbors had not treated widows and lepers justly.* They praised God’s words *about* *justice* but were not acting on God’s command to enact *mercy* toward outcasts.

That’s when they *“all”* got angry and turned into a mob. At least, the majority of them didn’t want to hear this. They flew into a rage.

Later in Luke we read: *When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

Jesus’ escape almost seems like a supernatural event — as if he simply walked away from the mob, parting the angry crowd like Moses at the Red Sea. A miracle!

But…I wonder…what if a few in the crowd helped protect him? What if the quiet minority made a path for him to “pass through the midst of them”?

What do you do when the mob turns ugly? When widows and lepers, when LGBTQ people and immigrants, are afraid and treated cruelly — and when a brave prophet calls out the self-righteous? What do you do when there’s a lynch mob or a cross-burning?

I suspect the unnamed heroes of this story stepped outside of the *“all,”* not willing to be part of the totality, and made a way for the intended victim to pass safely.

That is, indeed, a miracle. *The bystanders find the courage to do something.*

And that’s the overlooked miracle of Luke 4: Only a community — even one that goes unnoticed in the crowd — the band that refuses to join the rabble — can keep us from going completely over the edge.

Last year, Bishop Budde wrote a book, titled: *How We Learn to be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith*. Her book is about those decisive moments when we are called to act with courage and, much to our own amazement, *we do.*

Decisive moments are *marking events.* They stand out in our memory and are what others often remember about us. These are her words:

*“I am convinced that we all have the capacity to live within a narrative of great adventure, no matter our life circumstances. The courage to be brave when it matters most requires a lifetime of small decisions that set us on a path of self- awareness, attentiveness, and willingness to risk failure for what we believe is right. It is also a profoundly spiritual experience, one in which we feel a part of something larger than ourselves and guided, somehow, by a larger Spirit at work in the world and in us. Decisive moments make believers out of everyone, for no matter what name we give to it, the inexplicable, unmerited experience of a power greater than our own working through us is real. The audacious truth is that we matter in the realization of all that is good and noble and true. I want to expand our notion of what constitutes a decisive moment, for they come in many forms and require a wide range of decisions, equally decisive yet different in their energy and outcome.”*

Friends, Budde’s message this past Tuesday morning was a reflection of Jesus’ call to love our neighbors, to care for the oppressed, and to seek justice for the marginalized *today, now*—echoing the words of Jesus in Luke 4. The fact that it’s gone viral across social media is proof that mainstream Christians—and the public at large-- are hungry for truth-telling, justice-seeking people to step up at this critical moment for our democracy and our faith.

Let us pray—

*Dear God, grant us the courage to walk with compassion, and the wisdom to extend mercy and kindness to all, so that we may help build a world where every soul feels seen, safe, and at home. Amen.*