

Another Opening...
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 9:1-4
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 4:12-23

“Another Op’nin’, another show; In Philly, Boston, or Baltimoe; a chance for stagefolks to say hello; another op’nin’, another show...” Cole Porter’s lyrics and music amped the audience energy and anticipation on opening night in Broadway’s New Century Theatre as the curtain rose for the 1948 musical, *Kiss Me Kate*. The lyrics of the second verse, though not as familiar, speak to the angst of singers, dancers, musicians, directors, and producers, whose livelihood, and maybe even their next meal, are dependent upon a positive review. “Another job that you hope, at last, Will make your future forget your past, Another pain where the ulcers grow, Another op'nin', another show.”

Producers want to nail opening night, leaving the audience both stunned by the spectacle and warmed by the sense they were a part of the company, like members of the cast family. Producers want a big splash, a full house, and directors want perfection, their performers *in the zone*. Even *The Muppets* wanted nothing less. Remember their theme song? “It's time to get things started, On the most sensational, inspirational, celebrational, muppetational; This is what we call the Muppet Show!”

Sensational. Inspirational. Celebrational. Muppetational. Nobody wants to lay an egg, fire a dud, bomb at the box office or be left scrambling to put lipstick on a pig. The typical movie premiere is more than an opening, it's a red carpet cultural phenomenon: the limousines; the lights; the paparazzi; the name-dropping, celebrity fawning reporters; the fashion designers; the over-the-top glamour shots as the cameras whir. It's Hollywood; It's Manhattan; It's London; It's Cannes on the Riviera.

So, let's say you're the producer for the premiere, opening night, the public reveal of Jesus, Messiah, Savior, Son of God. What's your p.r. strategy? A torchlit, fireworks firing, gilded invitation extravaganza with fine wine, grand introductions, celebrities, and world leaders. Harps, horns, drums, and pipes ... maybe the Rolling Stones. I mean, surely Mick was alive then, wasn't he? It would be set on Jerusalem's temple mount, the broad expanse of the court of the Gentiles; or maybe the Circus Maximus in Rome which could accommodate 150,000 people. You want the masses to be awe-struck, dazzled, entranced, wholly bought in, can't wait to go tell their friends. Think about it, 150,000 new Jesus fans go tell just two of their friends, and soon you're scheduling a church pot luck for nearly half-a-million. You're building your brand with one of those new edgy church

names, like Next Level, Launch, Epic Venture, or one I saw recently - TheCruX.

Granted, our p.r. department wasn't exactly trend conscious - South Mecklenburg Presbyterian. It's a mouthful, but it kinda grows on you once you meet the people - SMPC, sounds a bit like BYOB. Producers are looking for the big splash, the provocative, bedazzling ad campaigns, that which cannot be ignored (20th Century Fox theme). Cameras, lights, reporters from the E channel, fashionistas critiquing the red-carpet celebrities. *And Jesus, who are you wearing this evening? Why Christian Dior, of course.*

So, what is the deal with Matthew's premiere of the Jesus project. "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee." Wait a minute! Withdrew to Galilee. If Rome was the center of political and financial life and Jerusalem was the center of religious life, Galilee ... was not the center of anything, really. The boonies, the hinterlands. Hey, I grew up in the hinterlands, and I can tell you, Hollywood doesn't schedule premieres near my hometown. In fact, remember when the film, *Three Billboards in Ebbing, Missouri* was all the buzz at the Oscars? They didn't even go to Missouri to film it. The opening scene pans over the

quaint small town, and I'm leaning over to Donna, "Hey, that's not Missouri. That's Sylva!" You know, outside of Asheville. You don't go to the outback for any kind of premiere, grand opening, debut,

So, Jesus' p.r. team wasn't that Hollywood kind of savvy. But maybe, the big splash, the star-studded spectacle was never what Jesus had in mind. Maybe there was method in the madness of going to flyover country for the launch.

The crowds weren't waiting for Jesus, so Jesus started with what they call retail politics, door to door canvassing, face to face introductions. "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me...'" The crowds would eventually come, but crowds weren't the priority, because you could hide in a crowd, and Jesus was never content with your anonymity. Jesus has always been about connection, relations, forming bonds, creating families, recognizing faces, remembering names, listening to understand. Perhaps you've felt the folksinger's sentiment: don't tell me you'll love me forever; love me for real.

Jesus' operating system wasn't based on spectacle, but was based on invitation. "Follow me." Sure, Jesus could do the miracle thing, but his priority was always the geometry of the vertical and horizontal, God's connection to us, and our bonds with each other. In fact, as you read the gospels, you can at times sense that Jesus is a bit uneasy about the miracles, always trying to redirect our focus from the spectacle to the kinship. You get the impression that rather than dazzling us, Jesus would much prefer spending an afternoon with us.

Early in Mark's gospel when crowds are crowding, everyone looking for their own autographed miracle, Jesus resisted, saying, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." In the gospel of Luke, when a group of town folks go to extreme measures, lowering their paralyzed friend through the roof to bypass the crowd clamoring around Jesus, Jesus' priority is connection before miracle. He says, "Your sins are forgiven..." In other words, Jesus is saying to him, "Whatever it is that is a barrier between me and you, or you and them, is removed, whether you walk or not. The walls are broken down; the bridges are built. Our bond is strong and nothing will change that."

Jesus wasn't the rock star hidden in the underbelly of the stadium until rising to the stage, soaking in the roar of the crowd. Jesus is out in the ticket lobby, making connections and conversations with the other folks waiting in line. *Where are you from? Have we met before? Because I feel like I know you. Say, we've got an extra ticket to next week's show if you'd like to come with us.*

Jesus is all about invitation rather than spectacle. And so it should be for Christ's church. Our strength is not special effects, billboards, and efforts to recreate Super Bowl halftime shows and Olympics opening ceremonies. No, our strength is when you sense the Spirit of Christ connecting you to others here, having the sense that this is a place you want to call home, so much so, you'd like neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers to experience it with you, not wanting anyone to miss it, or let anyone go uninvited. It's all about invitation. It's always been about invitation.

"As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me ... As he went from there,

he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.”

What do they call Hollywood? *The Dream Factory*. It’s all dependent on illusion. That’s okay, very entertaining, but it’s not Jesus. Jesus is real, fully present, engaged and interested, face-to-face. What do they call Broadway? *The Great White Way* – dazzling lights, incredible sets, costumes, and choreography. It is pretty cool, but it’s not Jesus. Jesus is down there with the fishing boats, the brackish smells, the sweat of labor. Jesus is not what you dream about. Jesus is hanging out where you are, not the polished, air-brushed, *Architectural Digest*, *GQ* cover lifestyle you imitate, but the harried morning, get-the-kids-to-school-praying-they-actually-brushed-their-teeth, spill-your-coffee-when-slamming-on-the-brakes-before-spending-the-day-buried-in-spreadsheets-and-embarrassed-when-caught-nodding-off-during-the-marathon-Zoom-meeting kind of life.

You know what the late Anthony Bourdain’s great idea was in this foodie-obsessed era? He didn’t take us to the posh gazillion dollar, no hope of getting a reservation, dining rooms. He’d take us to the corner hot dog stand in the gritty, not as pretty, part of the city where real people live, or

the kimchee and barbecue stall in the backstreets of Seoul where the locals eat. And he'd get the Michelin starred chefs to tag along with him, knowing this is where they came from and what inspired them. Jesus comes to find you where you live. Jesus knows who you are, has seen you at your most harried and haggard, and invites you to tag along anyway.

You know, I hadn't thought about it till this week, but isn't it interesting that Jesus' first invitations are to two sets of brothers? I hadn't paid much attention to that, perhaps because I don't have a brother, but I know people who do, and it leads me to ask: Jesus, what were you thinking? I know brothers who had files on them in the ER because of injuries stemming from the knock-down-drag-out-cage-fights they had when mom and dad weren't around - busted lips, broken wrists, holes in the drywall, lamps overturned. Perhaps you've seen the Geico commercial with the Wright Brothers fighting over the armrest on their first flight.

Jesus, are you sure about this? You think asking brothers to share the journey with you is such a good idea? It may not have been planned, but it became clear that sibling rivalries and divergent personalities were not going to impede Jesus' purpose or derail his invitation. They were there,

and they happened to be brothers, and you've got to start somewhere. You work with who's available.

We are here. This isn't the NFL draft, all complicated with combines, scouts, personality tests, vertical leaps, try-out camps, trades, and cuts. Jesus' invitation wasn't based on our skill sets, our resumes, our degrees of separation from glory. I'm always flummoxed if I hear someone say, *I just don't know if I belong here*. Are you kidding, they let me in! We just happened to be around and Jesus found us. We were invited, welcomed, called, embraced, challenged, and loved. And Jesus asks us to do the same. We were not put here to impress, but to invite; not to dazzle, but to care. Amen.