

February 3, 2019

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"Come Away from the Cliff"

THE INTRODUCTION & READINGS

POLLY VANASSE: Jesus knew his Bible. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures – the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Indeed, the rabbis and the fine congregants at the synagogue at Nazareth where he had grown up had taught him the sacred texts and traditions of the faith. His had been a good religious upbringing.

So as an adult, upon being baptized and then wrestling with evil in the wilderness, Jesus came to awareness of his own calling: that God had anointed him to carry out the Messiah's mission of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the proclamation of God's favor. Jesus must have felt a kinship with the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah's case, God had sent him to warn the people of impending destruction and to change their ways. Jeremiah remembered his call from God this way:

THE READING – Jeremiah 1:4-8 (read by Jay Gregory from the balcony with a handheld mic)

JAY GREGORY: Now the word of the Lord came to me saying:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

But the Lord said to me:

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy', for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you."

POLLY: In the power of the Spirit, Jesus *first* went into Galilee, to villages like Capernaum, where he was welcomed and where he did mighty deeds of preaching and healing. He was having great success! A little later he returned to his hometown of Nazareth. As was his practice, he went to worship on the Sabbath. During the service, it was customary for men of the congregation to read from the scrolls of scripture and comment upon them. Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, outlining his mission.

THE READING – Luke 4:20-30

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

²³He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' ²⁴And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.

²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers* in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.'

²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They 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.

³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

SERMON

Years ago, when Steve and I were serving two separate congregations in Northern Kentucky, there was an old, empty, church building standing on a hillside in the vicinity. We learned that before it closed in the early 1900s, two distinct congregations had shared it, each one using one of its two front doors, one worshipping in the morning, and the other at night. For a while the two denominations got on amicably, but when the Methodists installed an organ, the non-instrumental Church of Christ (*not United Church of Christ – "non-instrumental Church of Christ" congregations believe that musical instruments ought NOT be a part of worship*) was outraged. I don't know if the two groups tried to work out their theological disagreement, but one weekend, the Methodists came to church and found what was left of the burned organ on the front lawn! This story would be comical if it weren't true and so sad!

Conflict does not need to be a negative; it's a natural part of relationships, and believe it or not, conflict *can* lead to positive change, **but *no one* wants for it to escalate into violence, especially between religious groups!** The scripture in Ephesians instructs the church: "be angry, but do not sin." (Eph. 4:26)

So it's disturbing to read how the people of God "blew a gasket," as the Cotton Patch Version of the Bible puts it, over Jesus' sermon. We would rather that they had talked it through, but the participants took offense, and in their anger took *Jesus* to the cliff to throw him off – an acceptable form of stoning in the day.

Luke is pointing out that from the very beginning of his mission and even in his hometown, Jesus faced not just adulation from the crowds, but an undercurrent of anger. It wasn't Luke's purpose to teach the church how to be angry without sinning; this story is *not* a how-to manual on how to keep the peace. **Nevertheless, I noticed a linguistic detail this time** – the lectionary has this text come up every three years - **that I think can at least help us "come away from the cliff" if we see red.**

Maybe you noticed that three times in chapter 4, in slightly different words, Jesus is described as being "full of the Spirit:" after his baptism when he went into the wilderness, when he returned from there to Galilee, and then reading verse one of the passage from Isaiah. By contrast, near the end of his sermon, those attending the synagogue were "*full of anger.*"

What were they angry about?

It isn't obvious at first, like when I come home snippy and get annoyed with Steve – when I'm using "that tone." It's really the commute, the frustrations of what I couldn't get done that day, and the long list that is left that is bugging me.

At first I assumed that Nazareth was upset that Jesus had equated himself with the coming Messiah – maybe thinking that he was getting too big for his britches – but upon closer look, this is *not* what bothered them. Indeed, they were *proud* of the publicity their native son was generating; some of this rubbed off on them. They seem to want God's project as Isaiah itemized it to come about. Verse 22: "All spoke well of him: "Amazing! Gracious words! Joe's son, what do you know!"

Granted, we don't know everything about this conflict – its background, the personalities – *but* Jesus knew them very well and apparently he put his finger on the issue: they felt special and entitled. They were jealous of Capernaum and angry that he hadn't put Nazareth first on his campaign schedule. And then when he quoted those proverbs and the stories of Elijah and Elisha giving God's blessing to *foreigners*, well, it was a cruel mirror! Like when I get up in the morning and see my hair! (Shudder.) No, but more seriously, here he was holding up a mirror to the state of their souls, and the truth of their feelings of superiority was hard to look upon! It was *their own* scripture, after all, that he was quoting! New Testament

scholar Fred Craddock astutely observed that Jesus made them “face the truth of their own tradition,” and “learning what we *already* know is often painfully difficult.”¹

So all of us do well in situations of disagreement and heightened emotions to pause and ask ourselves: “What’s bothering me? What’s the issue? Why am I angry?”

Not only did Jesus point to the real issue, full of the Spirit, he points to the *real* goal.

Possibly relying upon the example of the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus kept returning to God’s call, to God’s project and mission – to his own vocation from God. He must have repeated to himself the Jubilee declaration from Isaiah and Leviticus many times before he read it aloud to them that Sabbath.

“God is directing me to give good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and God’s favor!” In other words, a time when children and youth are not trapped in poverty, when those who have been rehabilitated are actually released, when security is acknowledged *and* immigrants are treated fairly, when blind violence is given up: a society in which racism and injustice is truly unacceptable, a future in which political brinkmanship gives way to progress, and *all of us* let go of the lies we tell ourselves while we are sleeping through life!

Ronald Heifetz gave business leaders good advice when he wrote: “get to the balcony.”² In different words, regularly pause and get some perspective on your company – on your work. From there you can better see how things fit together and how they can advance. Heifetz meant for them to opt for the long view, to intentionally look at the bigger picture instead of bogging down in the mire of everyday frustrations as they transformed their institutions and themselves.

The pastor after me courageously led my former Seattle congregation to host a Tent City in its parking lot. “Tent cities” were makeshift communities of the homeless that raised awareness about how many were on the street and the need for shelter and housing for the working poor. Of course, agreeing to provide church space for their community over a period of time raised tensions inside and around these congregations, and naturally there were conflicts; this congregation had its fare share! You can imagine: the members had to learn to manage their territorialism, navigate interruptions, deal with utilities, go without easy parking, and develop new relationships, as they reached for the *larger* goal – had to keep the big picture in mind. In the course of putting priority on *God’s* project, members increased their

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990 – a part of the *Interpretation commentary series*), 63.

²Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership On the Line – Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), Chapter 3.

own agility and patience, plus deepened their spirituality. In the end, they played a part in the city building more low-income, affordable housing!

When we are filled with anger, it is like an infected abscess, but once we begin to drain it, there is room for the medicine of the *Holy Spirit* to fill and heal us, to direct and empower us. *Then*, God's mission will have a church! *Then*, we can rejoice when God's Jubilee project comes to pass for others in Capernaum and across the globe. Moreover, *then*, you and I can really experience the Good News!

Spirit of the living God, melt, mold, *fill*, and use us. Amen!