

“Comforting Words, Confronting Prejudice,  
and Cliffhangers.”

C Epiphany Four; Luke 4:21-30

February 3, 2019; 10:00 am

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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<sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were *amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth*. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

<sup>23</sup> He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” <sup>24</sup> And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. <sup>25</sup> But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers<sup>[d]</sup> in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

**I. THE REST OF THE STORY—PART ONE**

In last week’s episode, we left our hometown hero, Jesus of Nazareth, *in* the synagogue in Nazareth, giving a rousing sermon and filled with the Spirit.

He had wowed them with his eloquence, with his charismas, his teaching with authority.

“The Spirit is upon me. I have a call from God! Won’t you celebrate with me – you friends and family who have raised me as your own?!”

I have a Plan for my life.

To preach and teach and proclaim Good News to all God’s Children.

Isn’t that wonderful?!

And look! There’s even a scroll from the prophet Isaiah that outlines my vocation for me. It’s right here in print. Not everyone gets their destiny lined out so clearly for them!

And we rejoiced with Jesus. Just like the Nazarenes. We took his words to heart and considered how God’s Spirit was landing on *us* as well. How *we* were called, like Jesus, to live our one, wild and precious life with purpose, intention, listening to the guidance of that same Holy Spirit.

God's Spirit is on *us*;  
Holy Spirit has chosen *us* to preach the Message of good news to the poor,  
Sent *us* to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of all kinds of sight and insight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered, imprisoned, oppressed and discriminated-against free,  
to announce, "*This* is God's year to act!"

In us. With us. Alongside us. May *we* be God's agents. Water walkers. Poets parking pencils in trees so that Spirit might inspire at any moment. Hometown men and women, boys and girls, prophets, priests and everyday people. Chosen and sent by the Spirit.

And we sang a hymn and went out! We sang "Filled with the Spirit, filled with God's grace...." and we had an excellent Annual Meeting and committed ourselves to living out our call as a congregation with the Spirit upon *US*.

## **II. THE REST OF THE STORY—PART TWO**

However. As I told you last week, there's a Cliffhanger. "The Rest of the Story" as they say. Because Jesus didn't just roll up the scroll, hand it back to the attendant, and sit down and hush up.

He kept talking. And the more he talked about what that call on his life *meant*, the more doo-doo he got in! And pretty soon.....well.....you heard it! Marge read it just a moment ago:

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> 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.

Ooh boy! Our Hometown boy has done it now! Remember when I said that we forget that Jesus doesn't just turn over tables and cause a ruckus at the *end* of his ministry –during Holy Week?! He *starts out* challenging everything they've held dear, and stirring it up – right out of the gate!

## **III. WHAT WAS SO RADICAL?**

So, *what?!*

What did he say in those brief few moments that was so disturbing to them that they went from praising and hailing their hometown hero to questioning just who this upstart thought he was anyway?! "Isn't he just Joseph's son?! What the heck?!"

Hint: He did not throw the losing pass into the other side's hands so they could score the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. Jesus wasn't *that* kind of Hometown hero who let everyone down.

I had to go back and really peer into those verses to see what on earth got everyone so stirred up. It's a little hard to get at what he's saying – to find the rub.

It starts from the fact that he IS a hometown boy.

He knows them. ALL the good things *and* all the skeletons in their closets.

He knows their prejudices, they're hypocrisy, their hushed secrets, their lines in the sand; who lives on the wrong side of the tracks and who doesn't.

You know what the rub is? Grace.

Yep. The long arm of God's Grace reaching way out *beyond* their own town and circles, and reaching to those foreigners! Those outsiders! Those folks from a different church. Culture. Religion!

They wanted signs and wonders *here!* For his presence to mean God finally cared about their little town and was going to act in some cool ways!

Bruce Epperly describes the crowd's reaction:

"A new world is on the horizon, the world dreamed of by the prophets. Everyone is excited, but soon excitement turns to antagonism and bloodlust when Jesus extends the boundaries of salvation to include foreigners. They listen delighted that God's realm of Shalom is coming, but they imagine that is just for people like themselves. The Romans will be destroyed, the Temple restored to its grandeur, and the unclean neighbors, including some Jesus invokes, will be put in their rightful - inferior - place."

They can't imagine God caring for foreigners. They can't conceive of the day of Shalom involving all people.

#### **IV. CLIFFS OF LIFE**

Ever feel like you've been driven to the edge of a cliff? What drives you there? Threatens to undo you?

Push you over the edge?

Is it misunderstandings? Being misunderstood—either for what you've said or what you've done—or both?

Misunderstood for who you *are* and what you about?

Your mission and purpose in life? Your integrity?

Ever had your core values questioned or had people speak evil of you or repeat untruths?

Like Jesus, when has *your* life message not been heard?

Have you ever thought you were bringing *good* news, and it was taken as criticism or judgment, totally taken out of context or taken to mean something totally different from the good news for *all* it was intended to be?

When have you tried to build bridges with Jesus and found that others only wanted to build walls?

When have you tried to proclaim or fight for liberty for the captives and justice for all, and been challenged by those who would say: "*That's not the gospel?!*" Not only misinterpreted you but threatening.

How did you feel? Did it push you to the edge? Or, at least feel like you were hitting your head against a wall—even if not driven to the edge of cliff!

What do you do at those times? When life and circumstances push you to the edge or the ledge? How do you resist? Turn around, take a new approach, choose a different path – walk *through* the negative and threatening presence and spirits of the crowd? Like Jesus did that day on that ledge outside of Nazareth?

How do you let their words and intentions for evil against you slide off your back and determine that you are going to get back to your Father’s business, back to the calling for which you’ve been called? How do you not get distracted or diverted from the Spirit’s call upon your one, wild and precious life?

## **V. JESUS GOT BACK TO IT!**

Well, Jesus does it by exactly that – getting back *to* it! He gets *on* with his mission and purpose. On with his Father’s business. Teaching, healing, serving, casting out demons, confronting prejudice and oppression here and there, near and far. In the boundaries and out.

This fourth chapter of Luke gives a little whiplash as we read: from the edge of the cliff in Nazareth to ministering up a storm in Capernaum and beyond. But Jesus doesn’t let it get to him. Doesn’t get distracted and off course from his purpose just because they don’t interpret him right; just because they don’t “get him” in his own hometown.

We pick up on the ledge:

then took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of the village to throw him to his doom, but he gave them the slip and was on his way.

<sup>31-32</sup> He went down to Capernaum, a village in Galilee. He was teaching the people on the Sabbath. They were surprised and impressed—his teaching was so forthright, so confident, so authoritative, not the quibbling and quoting they were used to.

<sup>33-34</sup> In the meeting place that day there was a man demonically disturbed. He screamed, “Ho! What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you’re up to. You’re the Holy One of God and you’ve come to destroy us!”

<sup>35</sup> Jesus shut him up: “Quiet! Get out of him!” The demonic spirit threw the man down in front of them all and left. The demon didn’t hurt him.

<sup>36-37</sup> That set everyone back on their heels, whispering and wondering, “What’s going on here? Someone whose words make things happen? Someone who orders demonic spirits to get out and they go?” Jesus was the talk of the town.

He sure keeps ‘em guessing! Marvel at his teachings and then enraged. And then he slips right through their evil intent and stays true to his calling. Wow.

When we say we follow in Jesus' footsteps as Christians, those are some amazing footsteps!

## **VI. GO TO THE MARGINS**

Richard King describes Jesus' approach as "dragging the margin boundaries," and urges us to do the same:

Jesus lived on the margins and moved the margins to include all people, and hence invited hostile crowds to want to edge him out of existence. Today the church wants to edge Jesus out of our worship anytime the margins are made too wide and include too many who are not like us.

Recently I was sitting at my computer, contemplating the way Jesus offended so many people so quickly in his ministry. I asked, "Why?" The answer was at the top of my screen. My word processing instructions at the top read: "Drag the margin boundaries on the rulers." That is why he upset people so much: in his life he dragged the margin boundaries of race, creed, and color to include all people.

He dragged the margin boundaries when he gave a common meal, which we have made a holy meal symbolic of his inclusive love for all people. Jesus is dragged to the edge of a cliff to be put out of the lives of his townspeople because no one wants the margins of daily living to be inclusive of strangers.

(Richard W. Wing, *Deep Joy for a Shallow World*, CSS Publishing Company)

What are we to learn from Jesus' experience that day in Nazareth? Are we to challenge the status quo like he did? If "the Spirit is upon us" too, what does Part 2 –

The Rest of the Story call us to? In light of this Cliffhanger?

Is it to reach beyond the margins, right out of the gate? To open the eyes of the blind—ourselves included—to new ways of seeing –ourselves and God and one another?

## **VII. COMMUNION/BIGGER TABLE**

John Pavlovitz puts it well in "*A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*":

The place where God is will always be radically inclusive. It will always outgrow the container, always break beyond the borders we create or imagine or intend. The bigger table will always be leading us beyond where we believe the edge of our compassion and connection should be, and often this will be outside the rigid faith of our childhood.

This is the work Jesus did in the Jewish people who comprised the core of his inner circle. His call on their lives was to move beyond Judea and Samaria, "and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)

It's easy to miss the subversive nature of this directive. Can you imagine being an observant Jew raised to believe that the Gentiles were outside of the blessing of God, and then to be told that this is who you are to take the message to?

How audacious, how shocking, how downright heretical it would have seem? (Almost as counterintuitive as loving your enemies and blessing those who curse you." Thank

God that God is always going to be better at inclusion than we are; always more compassionate, more loving, more forgiving. We can't out-love God. (Page 155, Build a Bigger Table)

PICTURE: Pencils or Erasers?

Talk about picture: Where do we have pencils and where do we have erasers? We have a choice as we go through this life. We can carry our pencil with the pointy, line-drawing end down, and draw lines—in the sand, making boxes to keep ourselves and others in or out. Or, we can flip our pencil and put the eraser end to work—constantly!

Be like Jesus. Have the eraser end most employed!

May we, like Jesus, *study* the scriptures, and then share what we find. Bring comforting words found there and elsewhere. May we not shy away from the convicting and prophetic challenges therein as well!

May we be brave with our words and confront prejudice when it is found in its many forms. Confront it inside ourselves and not be afraid to admit it. Keep looking at the rulers and the margins and drawing them ever-wide and more embracing—even when it's not popular.

And may we not be afraid of cliffhangers – not to drive one another to the cliff, but when we are pushed to the edge, to know we have the spiritual resources to turn around and chart a new path, work through the challenging spirits and embark anew, focused on our

calling and purpose – given by the Spirit of the Lord. Amen.

