



“On the Edge”
Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby
Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 4:21-30

FEBRUARY 3, 2019

Do you ever wonder, how did we get here? I mean, it's what, forty degrees today! Rewind just to Thursday morning and we were in the middle of a ridiculous cold snap with dangerously cold weather and pipes freezing and instructions from an energy company to turn our thermostats down for the good of all. And now it is almost forty degrees - how did we end up at this place?

Or have you ever walked into the middle of a tense situation? Tempers have flared, voices are rising, the argument is escalating, and you think "I just walked out of the room for a minute or two - what happened?" How did we get here?

Or you might be wondering, listening as Mark read the final words from the Gospel passage, how did we get here? Just last Sunday, Ashley was standing here in the pulpit, preaching (I thought it was a great sermon, by the way) about a story from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus was invited to read in his hometown temple and as he read they were all amazed at what they were hearing. And now that story has resumed,

but their amazement turned to anger and before his sermon has really ended, the congregation had taken him out and was trying to push him off the cliff. On the edge. How did we get here? And why are we here? And what are we supposed to do about it?

If it feels like we are beginning this story in the middle of something that started long before us, well, I think that is fair. As Peter Eaton wrote, "We must always make sense of God, life, and the important issues before us, even though we usually begin in the middle of things. Rarely do we start at the beginning of any story, even our own, and rarely do we see a story to the end."

So, how did we get to this cliffhanger near the beginning of the Gospel of Luke? What is going on?

All the Gospels agree that from the moment Jesus sets foot in the pulpit, things get nasty. A friend of mine [William Willimon says], returned from an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. "When his Holiness speaks," my friend said, "everyone

in the room becomes quiet, serene and peaceful." Not so with Jesus. Things were fine in Nazareth until Jesus opened his mouth and anger and violence broke out. And this was only his first sermon!

We have had a number of pastoral interns here at Central over the years, seminary students learning about ministry, and part of what we help them do is have an opportunity to preach. And I work with them, and people give supportive yet honest feedback along the way, to in some cases approach their very first sermon. They usually know, and we encourage them in this belief, that preaching matters. That sermons are serious business. They are not just to make people feel comfortable. They are not just for enjoyment or entertainment. The good news of Jesus Christ will make demands upon us and help us imagine the world in a different way. But there are skills of public speaking that can help build trust and develop some authority, so that these gospel messages can better be heard and then, we hope, lived out.

In the first reading, we heard the story of God calling Jeremiah to be a prophet. We might think, what an honor, and what a humble guy. God wants Jeremiah to do this important thing, and he is so humbly saying, Why me, I am just a boy. But God extends a divine hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth and gave the boy words to say. Pretty cool stuff. Great story. Words that a Super Bowl Champion might say later today, what an honor and I am so unlikely. Except did we catch how that passage ended? What message Jeremiah would have to relay to the people?

Now I have put my words in your mouth, [God says]

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,

to pluck up and to pull down,

to destroy and to overthrow
(Jeremiah 1:9-10)

And while the last phrase is "to build and to plant," those words of plucking up and destroying and overthrowing are not going to exactly be words welcomed by those in power. It is a hard job to be a prophet for a living God who desires justice and true peace and who has bigger better dreams than we can imagine for a world we mistakenly think is ours to control and use up.

In our story from Luke, picking up from where we left off last week. Jesus, the hometown boy made good, had stood up to read scripture and they were amazed. So much admiration, pride, readiness to listen to what he had to say.

Good preaching can still the soul, but it can also trouble the waters. Sometimes what God wants us to hear are messages of comfort and joy. Other times, it is a call to change, a call to action, when we have grown all too comfortable with the status quo.

So they are attentive, eager to hear what he has to say, but almost as soon as Jesus sat down to preach, and started speaking, they quickly became furious. "Jesus just throws the book at them." [As William Willimon writes, Jesus]

hit them right between the eyes with Isaiah, and jabbed them with First Kings, right to the jaw, left hook. Beaten, but not bowed, the congregation struggled to its feet, regrouped, and attempted to throw the preacher off a cliff.

This is a passage that some preachers love a bit too much. Maybe they are on their way out of what they perceive as a rough/unfair situation and want to fan some flames on their way out. Blame the congregation. This is a passage that other preachers want to avoid - perhaps for the opposite reasons - things are comfortable in their congregation, even good. So why rock the boat? And some may feel that the congregation is better even at being faithful than the preacher is. Or in a two pastor church one of them gets to preach on this passage, and then the conclusion he states is that, you know, there are going to be times that she says things from the pulpit that are going to really make you mad. And don't go getting any ideas about throwing either of us off a cliff.

Good preaching takes risks - connecting old stories about a passionate God to the events of our lives and to God's world today. And so good preaching will take risks and try to employ our imaginations and will sometimes ruffle feathers and sometimes be received too well when the Gospel asked us to go at least one step beyond our comfort zone. All that may be true - but it doesn't really explain what happened in this story about Jesus in his hometown synagogue.

So why did I select this passage for today? Well, I haven't tackled it very often, so it had a freshness to me. And we are in a series of stories from the Gospel of Luke and I didn't want to avoid this one just because of it being challenging. And when it comes down to it, preaching is always a bit of a scary business. And the first few times I read the passage, I just wasn't quite sure what it had to say to us at Central. As one person commenting on this passage wrote, "the congregation is filled with rage only after Jesus gives them a tongue-lashing that seems to come out of left field." So let's dig in to that!

He preaches to these people who seem to know him pretty well, and he starts making connections to people that they don't know well. To these insiders, Jesus tells stories of outcasts and outsiders. And makes the point that in God's plan, the outcasts are being invited into God's inner circle.

It appears that he is intentional in his provocation. It is not an accidental oversight, this sermon that causes pain and anger. But an intentional act to send a message. That the good news he is proclaiming is rooted in their stories, and in their traditions, but is not just for them. Jesus will be reaching out to Gentiles, he is announcing in this first sermon - but the announcement does not come in a gentle way. And the message comes through loud and clear to those hometown worshippers. And they get defensive and angry and even violent.

With this placement of this story so early in the Gospel of Luke, I think the Gospel writer is trying to do some foreshadowing for us, the listeners. To help

us start realizing early on that following Jesus will take us to some uncomfortable places. Taking us to the edge of the cliff now, the cross later. Following Jesus requires a choice: do we go all the way to the edge with him facing the crowd together; or will it be easier to be among those who want to push him off and be done with it.

If the starting question for understanding is "how did we get to this point?" the more important question is: so now what? Having found ourselves at the edge, where are we going to go from here now?

In the gospel, with the good news of Jesus, we are sometimes put on edge. On the edge of painful truths about ourselves or the world. Or we get to stand on the edge and look out at a new possibility.

On Friday I began my fifteenth year at Central. I started here as a Designated Pastor with a four year mandate to help this congregation live or die with grace and

courage on Feb 1, 2005. And what a ride it has been. We have welcomed new people - most here today were not in the sanctuary on my first Sunday in the pulpit. We have embraced some of the possibilities in our time and in this city. When I first started, of course, it did not look to be easy. It was a daunting challenge, but I thought, if we could start to make it, there would be all sorts of new opportunities and new challenges that it would never become boring. And time has flown by. And once again, we are on the cusp of some exciting new beginnings.

And so this story of Jesus' sermon is that we need to keep on our edge. To stay open to new people and to new possibilities. To embrace the gospel even when it feels a bit scary, out of our comfort zone.

On the edge. On the edge of faith. On the edge of a new beginning. May we embark upon this journey with courage and faith. Amen.

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- ¹ Peter Eaton in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1 – Advent Through Transfiguration*, David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 309.
 - ² William Willimon, "Things Get Nasty," in *The Christian Century* 27 January 2004. I replaced his original phrase "and all hell broke loose," with "anger and violence broke out." Eaton, 311.