

“Throwing Jesus Off a Cliff”

- ¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee,
and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.
- ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.
- ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up,
he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.
He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.
He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:
- ¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because 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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’
- ²⁰ And 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.
- ²¹ Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’.
- ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

Then just 6 verses later they are so filled with rage that they drove him
not only out of the synagogue but out of town, intending to throw him off a cliff to kill him!

What???!!!

Now I know sometimes preachers say unpopular things – it’s part of our role as prophet
not to merely comfort the afflicted but to afflict the comfortable –
but it’s difficult to figure out how we go from
“²²All spoke well of him & were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth”
to “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.
²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill ...
so that they might hurl him off the cliff” in 1 sermon!

What on earth is going on here???!!!

I remember once hearing a pastor say that people were upset
because Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.
But that doesn’t make sense because after he says the prophecy has been fulfilled,
they are amazed at his gracious words.
At this point, they are proud of their hometown guy, proud of Joseph’s son!
So what is it that makes things go south so very quickly? Well, in one sense it’s Jesus’ fault.
We’ve talked before about the creative power of words.
If you say, “I am sick”, those words, “I am” bring into being whatever follows.
The words “I am sick” summon sickness, create sickness, bring sickness into being.
So when Jesus says, “You will say,
‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum’”
he is setting them up to say just that.
And when he says, “²⁴... no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown”
he is summoning that very thing – their non-acceptance – into being.

And then Jesus goes on to explain why it is that they won’t accept him.
Listen carefully and see if you can figure out why they become enraged.

- ²⁵ ‘...there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah,
when ... [for] 3-1/2 years there was a severe famine over all the land;
²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.
²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha,
and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’”

Anyone get it? Anyone understand why Jesus is referring to these 2 particular stories?
Anyone understand what is in these two references that has the power to enrage
and turn an ordinary congregation of religious folk into a mad murderous mob?

Well, I think it's like this...

Jesus was telling them that all those wonderful things he had been doing throughout Galilee,
he would not be doing here.

He was telling them that God had sent him not to them –
not to the people who had provided for him all these years, who had helped raise him,
who had provided the resources of the community to him,
who had helped develop and shape and form him into the gifted person he had become.

They were not going to benefit from their investment in him.

He was not going to use his gifts – the gifts they had helped provide for him – to help them.

Think for a moment what it would've been like to be a widow in Israel starving to death
during a famine due to 3-1/2 years with no rain
and the local prophet Elijah does not come to you with food;
instead he goes to a different country and provides food for a woman there.

Or think about how you would feel if you were suffering from a horrible disease
that not only ravaged your body, but cut you off and isolated you
from your family, your friends, and all of society –
not just for 10 or 14 days but for the rest of your life –
and Elisha, the local doctor with the miracle cure,
does not offer it to you or anyone else of your class and creed and caliber –
but only to one of "those" people from across the border.

So here we have Jesus telling his own community that God is not sending him to help them;
rather, God is sending him to those "other" people, people who are not like them,
people who aren't as deserving or hardworking or important.

Why would God do that?

Obviously there must've been plenty of people in Nazareth
who had been injured or who were suffering from illness or permanent disability.

Why would God withhold healing from them while providing it to other people?

One clue comes from the community response to Jesus, "*Is not this Joseph's son?*"

And the answer to that is that, while Jesus may be Joseph's adopted son,

Jesus is actually God's son. And Mary's son.

And Mary, from the time she was a young girl, had always seen the world
from a different perspective than Joseph.

Joseph was a man in a patriarchal society.

Joseph had power and privilege that Mary did not have
and probably (like most of us with power and privilege)

Joseph was completely unaware of it, while Mary was very much aware.

This is clear in her song of praise,

*"[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."*

"Isn't this Joseph's son?" They ask. And the answer is "No. This is MARY's son.

The last time we hear of Joseph, Jesus was 12 years old.

So it's likely that Joseph's influence on Jesus disappeared early on
and it was Mary's view of the world that shaped Jesus.

And so when Jesus reads these words from Isaiah,

"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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

he must have been smiling inside

because he recognized them as just another expression of his mother's world view.

Now, while Mary speaks of the powerful and the lowly, the hungry and the rich,

Isaiah speaks only of those who are poor, captive, blind and oppressed –
at least he only mentions them explicitly.

But if the captives are being released, it's obviously not good news for the captors.

If the oppressed are being set free, it's not good news for the oppressors.

And that bit about proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor?

Well in the jubilee year, anyone owning slaves lost every one of them,
and anyone hoping to collect on a loan was out of luck as all debts were cancelled.

Isaiah and Mary and Jesus all understood that in a world

in which some possess power and privilege and others do not, God is always on the side of those without.

Now that doesn't mean that people with power and privilege can't experience illness or grief or loss.

Every human being experiences illness and grief and loss.

But the experience of illness or grief or loss does not negate power or privilege.

In the fall of 2020 late night show host Jimmy Kimmel shared the heart wrenching story

of how his son was born with a pre-existing congenital heart condition.

Many children are born with such conditions. Without access to affordable care, these children die.

Kimmel had access and his 3-day-old child had his first surgery, and later 2 more surgeries,

and today he is a thriving 3-year-old.

On his late night TV show, Kimmel issued a passionate plea that as a society

we make sure that every parent has that same access to save the life of their child.

I know that what I'm going to say, you are not going to want to hear.

But I am trusting that you will not drive me out and try to murder me.

Primarily because these are not my words –

they are the words of Jesus and Mary and Isaiah and Luke – and indeed all of scripture.

While God created each of us, while God loves each and every one of us,

while God hears every prayer that you and I speak,

God did not divide the world into the rich and the poor, the famous and the unnoticed,

the powerful and the powerless,

those who have nice homes and those who live in rat infested tenements,

those whose refrigerators are filled, and those whose cupboards are empty,

those who can afford needed medical care, and those who can't,

those whose families own multiple vehicles and those who wait at bus stops,

those who have graduate degrees and those who had to drop out of high school

to get a job to pay for their sick mother's cancer treatments,

those who have jobs with health plans and 401ks

and those who work for minimum wage and make \$500/week,

\$2000 to pay all expenses for the month – rent, transportation, food, & prescriptions.

God did not divide up the world like that. We did.

And here's what Jesus says about that.

When it comes to preferential treatment, God chooses those who are not like us.

God's preference lies with the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the unemployed,

the undereducated, the underinsured.

God's preference lies with women and those who identify as LGBTQ, and those with darker skin.

If you hear that and you feel anger and resentment welling up within you,

then you understand what happened in the synagogue that day.

All of that is true.

By almost any standard I can think of used to measure me I am in God's non-preferred class.

The only thing that could possibly get me onto the side God prefers is my gender.

So does that mean God does not love me? Of course not.
God loves each and every one of us equally.

So how do we reconcile that equal love with God's preferential treatment?

Well, we are talking paradox so I'm not sure I can actually explain it.

But what I have learned is that I am more likely to experience the joy and the love of the Lord
in my relationships with those who have less privilege and power than I.
Because it's my privilege & power that get in the way of me acknowledging God's privilege & power
and keep me from submitting and yielding my privilege and power to God.
However, when I lay aside my privilege and power in a relationship,
when I am having dinner with 2 gay friends
and see a love that has had to conquer far more than heterosexuals have had to conquer,
when I am worshipping in a black congregation
and hear testimonies of faith of people who are beaten down and traumatized again and again,
when I travel and stay in a home without running water
and experience a hospitality like I've never experienced among people of my social class,
when I have related to these people not to fix them or give to them
but to enter into their world and learn from them,
God shows up and there is a joy that you just can't find in the halls of privilege and power.

That's why God chose to become incarnate in the form of a marginalized person –
because that's where God goes to bring joy that overshadows happiness,
peace that passes understanding, and a love that knows no bounds.

The people in the synagogue that day had two choices:
they could allow Jesus's words to offend and enrage them to the point where they drove him –
drove God – out of their midst;
or they could have chosen to leave their power and privilege behind and follow Jesus
and be with those who were poor and oppressed,
not so they could set them free, but so they could be there to see Jesus set them free.
Because when Jesus starts setting them free, he'll set you free, too.

Mission may end with doing something.

But I think mission begins when we leave the comfort of our Nazareth,
the familiarity of our own community, the comfort of people "like us"
and follow Jesus to places where there are people who are marginalized and oppressed –
not so that we can fix them or help them or do anything for them,
but simply to be with them and listen to them and learn from them
and then watch what Jesus does among us all.

When Jesus goes out this week to be with people who are marginalized in some way –
by race or class or religious persuasion, by gender or sexual identity, expression or orientation,
by education or language or country of origin – I will be following Jesus –
not so that I can save or fix or help anyone but so that I can be there with Jesus as he does.
Because I have a feeling that as Jesus begins to release the bonds & break the chains & set others free,
maybe he'll set me free, too.

Jesus' mission begins by going to those who know that they are oppressed and captive.
Our job is to follow into those places and live among the captives
until we realize that we, too, have been bound – bound by our very power and privilege.
And once we realize that, then Jesus can set us free, too.
And then together – oppressed and oppressor, captive and captor, victim and victor –
we can celebrate our freedom and the hope and peace and love and joy of Christ –
Christ who is with us, in us, around us and among us, now and forever. Amen