

Sermon Notes for 1/31/16 (Epiphany 4)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 4:21-30

Theme: A REAL CLIFF-HANGER IN JESUS' HOMETOWN

The Point: Jesus' "cliff-hanger" sermon at Nazareth and the mob's "cliff-hanger" reaction point to God's "cliff-hanger" plans to rescue people from all nations.

Introduction: Who shot J.R. Ewing? Remember the conclusion of that 1984 episode of the TV drama *Dallas*, when we had to wait those agonizing months to find out who it was who had actually shot Bobby Ewing as he sat in J.R.'s chair at the business? That was what we would call a cliff-hanger. Today's Gospel has elements that I would like us to think about as "cliff-hangers" today.

Jesus quoted some "cliff-hanger" prophecies from Isaiah's prophetic work. Some seven hundred years earlier, Isaiah had put these words into the mouth of the Messiah who had been prophesied for hundreds of years already at his time: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me." But then generations came and went, and the hope of that Messiah seemed to be nearly extinguished, even among the chosen people. Would that prophecy ever be fulfilled – the Spirit, the Lord, the Servant, all focused on one who would be God's promised suffering servant? Would anyone finally see the fulfillment of these tremendous predictions? Or would the promise die out for lack of anyone to believe it anymore?

Jesus' words were also, in a real sense, "cliff-hangers." They left people wondering what was next, what caused Him to say what He said, and what the implications might be. We have to remember that this Gospel reading follows immediately upon last week's Gospel in which Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah those prophetic words, "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then He had spoken those entrancing, cliff-hanger words (the last verse of last week's Gospel – but picked up as the first words of this week's Gospel – I believe the only time this happens in the lectionary?), "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Those words left us hanging last week. The Messiah has now appeared. That is Jesus' word to the Nazareth synagogue crowd. This week we move the story forward a bit. The first reaction to Jesus by His hometown synagogue-attenders that day was amazement. But that amazement also turned quickly to skepticism. "Is not this Joseph's son?" they asked. They figured they had Him pegged, that they knew Him as the one who had been living among them as the carpenter's son (and probably since Joseph's death, the carpenter himself). Nothing special about Him, they reasoned. Their skepticism was soon to become deep-rooted anger and hatred, after Jesus' next teaching.

"No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown," Jesus said. His identifying Himself as a prophet (and even, perhaps, as Messiah) might have been difficult enough for them to accept, especially when they had grown up with Him and played stickball or tag or hide and seek with this fellow as He grew. But when He went on to talk about some of Israel's key prophetic figures and to interpret their lives for them, it was just too much. "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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, only Naaman the Syrian." Jews were not friends with the people of Tyre and Sidon – nor with the Syrians. And yet Jesus used these foreigners as examples of how widely God's grace would sweep. His mercy was not intended only for the people of Israel. He intended to rescue people from every tribe and language and nation and people.

That was offensive to the people of Nazareth. They could take no more. They were enraged, we are told, to the point that they decided to make use of the cliff on which the city stood. Which brings us to the next “cliff-hanger.” They drove Jesus out of town and up to the brow of the cliff, intending to make Him an example of what happens to false prophets by tossing Him to His death. But His time to die had not yet come, nor was this the method of Messiah’s death that the prophets had revealed. Luke doesn’t leave us hanging on the cliff, however, for he reports that Jesus simply “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” Jesus Himself would go as the Father had directed, and dying after His first public sermon was not the way that the Messiah was to finish His earthly career.

Do you know the name Stephen (“Steph”) Curry? If you know anything about NBA basketball, you may be aware that Stephen Curry is the high-scoring, high-flying point guard of the Golden State Warriors. He is considered by some to be the greatest shooter in NBA history. Last year he won MVP honors in the NBA and led the Warriors to the championship. Curry’s dad played college ball for Virginia Tech, and Curry wanted to be a Hokie, too – but they offered him only a place as a walk-on player, so he attended Davidson instead. Apparently not only a prophet, but sometimes a basketball player is without honor among those he considers the hometown folks. At any rate, Curry is also a steadfast and bold witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is quoted as saying, “First and foremost, I have to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for blessing me with the talents to play this game. I’m His humble servant right now, and I can’t say enough how important my faith is to who I am and how I play the game. I know I have a place in heaven waiting for me because of Him, and that’s something no earthly prize or trophy could ever top.”

Sometimes we get focused on reasons that we should not be so bold and courageous about our witness to the Lord Jesus. Jeremiah objected to the Lord’s call because he was too young. “Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” In Israelite parlance, a young man was not considered to be an adult until he was thirty years of age. Then he could finally read the Scriptures and be entrusted with adult responsibilities. It was no accident that Jesus began His public ministry at the age of 30. But even that time-honored boundary was something that God could overrule. He told Jeremiah, “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.”

Maybe it is not being too young that bothers you. Perhaps it is that you feel you are too old – or too inexperienced – or not biblically knowledgeable enough – or not a good debater – or not respected by people – or whatever. You know your own boundaries better than I do. But when the Lord calls you to speak to someone, you are the right person to speak. When the Lord calls you to be His representative to another person, you are just the perfect person to stand there. When the Lord appoints you to carry His truth to others, there is no one more perfectly equipped than you are to bring that message in the way He wants it carried to them. Jeremiah learned that – even though he had to learn the hard way that the message from the Lord would not always be accepted. We are not called on to be successful, but to be faithful in our service to our God.

You may not have the platform that a Stephen Curry has for bearing witness to the Lord Jesus. But God does not call you to be Stephen. He calls you to be yourself, bearing witness to Jesus’ love to those whom you know, to members of your family and to people in your circle of friends and to the group that you work with week in and week out and to the group that you meet for coffee every week. That love of the Savior is spelled out quite thoroughly in this week’s Epistle lesson. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Jesus boldly proclaimed the expansive reach of God's grace to the crowds in Nazareth. And even when they responded in loveless ways, even though they were arrogant and rude and rejoiced in their wrongdoing, even though they were irritable and resentful toward this One whom they thought they knew, He continued to bear all things, to bear their irritableness and their resentment and their arrogance all the way to Calvary's hill. He continued to believe that the Father would set all things right in His time. He continued to live in hope of the life that conquers death, and He endured everything that man's hatred could pour out, confident that there would be the fullness of joy on the other side of the grave.

So you are I are called to live as well, bearing with all things, even the anger and resentment of those who may be closest to us. We are called to live, believing that our Lord Jesus in His dying and rising has opened the door of Paradise to all of us, none of whom have deserved such mercy. We are called to live in hope of God's promises, even those that seem so impossible of fulfillment to us today. We are called to endure all things, especially those things that make our stomachs ache and our fears leap up and our bodies and spirits wither. We may even be called to be witnesses to the hated Syrians of our day, just as Naaman would have been despised by the Jewish people of his day. Who is it that you have considered outside the bounds of God's grace? How is God calling you to love that person?

Did you remember it was Katherine Wentworth (Cliff Barnes' erstwhile, conniving sister) who shot Bobby? I didn't – so I had to look it up. I thought I'd better not leave you on that cliff-hanger, lest you all might have to pull out your smart phones before communion to find out who had done it.

Conclusion: God's "cliff-hanger" plan from the very beginning was to rescue folks from every people group. The salvation plan would not be fulfilled by snatching up people from the nation of Israel alone. They were chosen, elected to serve as God's light to the Gentile world. And if they failed and refused to do so, then God would send the Light Himself, His own dear Son, to shine light on the entire world. "A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel" – that was how Simeon put it as he glorified the Lord while he held the infant Jesus in his aged hands. Simeon's life was a sort of "cliff-hanger" existence. He was an old man – and yet he lived with that assurance (given to him by the Holy Spirit) that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Once he had laid eyes on that Son of Mary who was also the Son of God, he was ready to go in peace. So we can be ready to go this day. We don't have to wait and hope the Messiah will one day show up. We can rejoice in that He has come and has fulfilled all the will of God that was required for us to be saved. We can rejoice that He is here this day under those blessed forms of bread and wine to feed and strengthen us for today's challenges and responsibilities. And we can rejoice in that He is coming again – and until then, we live to reflect His light and His life to all those we encounter until the day He calls us to His eternal kingdom. For the sake of Jesus our Lord and our Messiah, AMEN!