

“The Rest of the Story”  
January 30, 2022

Amos 7:10-15  
Luke 4:21-30

Rabbi Ishmael taught in the Talmud: “All beginnings are difficult.”

This morning we heard of the difficult beginning of the prophetic ministry of Amos.

And we heard of the difficult beginning of the ministry of Jesus.

Now, if you worshipped with us last Sunday, you will remember that this story doesn’t start out all that bad.

After being baptized by John in the Jordan River, after a time of testing in the wilderness, Jesus begins to teach and is very well received. Luke says that Jesus was praised by everyone.

One Sabbath day in Nazareth, the village in Galilee where he grew up, Jesus goes to the synagogue, which, Luke tells us, was his custom.

He reads the words of God’s call from the scroll of Isaiah: “God 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.”

Those words of Isaiah come as good news event to us today, because all too often our sight becomes blurred. Our purposes and goals become obscured. As individuals and as a congregation we can get caught up in self-preoccupation, captive in prisons of our own making.

So, it is good when we are reminded of the hope of the prophets: release for the captive, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed—something greater than ourselves and our little plans.

After reading the prophet, Jesus sits down and begins to speak.

And things continue to go well.

Hearing Jesus, all the people speak well of him.

I hear these words as words of judgment—or at least as words of caution.

My job, after all, is to “speak well of Jesus.” I work hard at it. Each Sunday and throughout the week, I’m expected to put in a good word for Jesus, to commend him to others.

But we know how this story ends, don’t we?

The same people who were speaking well of Jesus listen a little more to what he has to say. He reminds them that often their ancestors—his *own* ancestors—missed what God was doing in their midst. He reminds them that God’s favor is often with the outsider.

In the time of a famine, the prophet Elijah was sent only to a widow in Sidon, foreign territory.

Elijah's successor, Elisha, healed none of the many lepers in Israel but only Naaman, the Syrian, the foreigner.

Reading through Luke's gospel, we keep hearing this theme—that God is concerned with the outsider, with those who live on the margins. Lepers and foreigners, the despised and disregarded often receive or show the love of God more than those on the inside track. And it is only in Luke's gospel that we hear the parable telling us that even a loathsome Samaritan could be “good.”

When we hear about Jesus and his confrontations with the religious authorities, we must always remember that both Jesus and his earliest followers were Jewish and sought to be faithful to the God of the covenant. His arguments with the leaders and the people were not condemnations of Judaism. They were more like disagreements within a family.

As we listen, however, we begin to wonder what we, too, might be missing; we worry about those whom we might want to exclude.

For 2000 years, church people have drawn lines—lines that God refuses to draw. The late Desmond Tutu was getting at this when he said “We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low.” I don't know whom the good Archbishop was surprised to see, but I do know that I'm always thankful for God's low standards.

In the United Church of Christ in general and in this congregation in particular, we seek to open ourselves to all people. Our ongoing mission works to erase those lines of exclusion that Christians have so often drawn, that some still want to draw. This comes as a wonderful surprise to many who had never imagined that a church could be like this.

We listen carefully when Jesus suggests that it is through “outsiders” that God often acts.

Still, we should realize that when we listen for the word of God, we might not like what we hear. Words about release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind are good news. But they first might only make us aware of just how imprisoned, how unseeing we are—even with all of our liberal, progressive sophistication.

God's word can sound like judgment.

But that word also sounds like grace. Because the news that we are captive and blind comes as a moment of opportunity. Then we can seek a deeper freedom and clearer sight.

To the captive, the poor, the sightless—to the lost of the world good news is spoken. It informs our choices. It transforms our lives.

Not that we necessarily want this.

As the people listen further to Jesus, as they take in what the hometown boy is saying, they become “filled with wrath”—a great biblical phrase that means they were really angry—angry enough to kill. The people who speak well of Jesus want to throw him off a cliff as soon as he says something they don't like.

An Anglican bishop is said to have lamented: “Everywhere the apostle Paul went, there were riots. Everywhere I go, they serve me tea.”

After hearing the reading from the Gospel of Luke, my own thoughts take a similar direction: When Jesus preached, the people wanted to throw him off a cliff. When I preach, you line up to say “Good morning,” and tell me, “Nice sermon.”

Is it something I said?

Is it something I didn’t say?

Of course, it’s not just me. All of us can speak so well of Jesus.

At the same time—admit it—we’d just as soon throw him over the cliff when our values and our lifestyles are threatened by his words and his actions:

When Jesus suggests that the quest for more and more things might be keeping us from loving God and neighbor—**THROW HIM OFF A CLIFF!**

When Jesus suggests that our labeling people “good” and “bad,” “acceptable” or “unacceptable” might be contrary to God’s way of seeing—**THROW HIM OFF A CLIFF!**

When Jesus suggests that we confront evil in the world rather than look the other way or passively accept it—**THROW HIM OFF A CLIFF!**

“Crucify him.” That’s where this story is going, isn’t it? And all of us—those who preach, those who listen, those who would speak well of Jesus—we are all ready to join in as soon as we hear something we don’t like.

The angry crowd rises up. We take Jesus out of the city and lead him to the brow of the hill in order to throw him down headlong.

What happens next is one of those *strange* incidents that keep people from opening their Bibles—or that keep people *returning* to their Bibles.

What happens next is a mystery, and one that points to the ways of God in our world and our lives: Jesus walks straight through the crowd and goes on his way.

How did that happen? I have no idea.

*That* it happened seems perfectly in line with who the living Christ is and how he works among those of us who are foolish enough to want to follow him in spite of our anger toward him and our misgivings about him.

The way of Jesus Christ is his own way—and all the hatred, anger, and violence of the world and of his followers will not stop him from going on that way. Even death will not stop him, for his life is a witness to a love that is stronger than death.

The choice to follow on that way or not is ours. Christ will continue on the way of life-giving love whether or not we choose to be a part of that way.

But here and there, now and then, we find the ability to follow—individually, as a congregation.

Here and there, now and then, we find Christ working among us, giving us strength where we are weak, courage where we are cowardly, helping us to love when hating would be so much easier.

We follow—and following, we tell the rest of the story: good news to those who hunger and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Our Annual Meeting this morning is our yearly celebration of the ways in which we have been able to follow into the ways of Jesus Christ as those ways continue to be made known to us.

The living Christ goes on his own way. May we—all of us who speak well of him, all of us who would rather toss him off a cliff—be so transformed by the love of God that we too might follow on his way of love.