

Text: Luke 4: 22-30  
Title: Just Off the Cliff  
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*An essay by William Willimon reminded me of "Revelation" by Flannery O'Connor and set me on this path. I referenced the story once before in a sermon six years ago. I don't have a better way to get a toehold today.*

"Revelation" opens with Ruby and Claud Turpin sitting in a doctor's waiting room. A farm woman with an ample lap, Ruby strikes up a conversation with some of the other patients in the waiting room, while also carrying on an internal conversation commenting on and evaluating each person sitting around her. Because of clothing and complexion, by discourse and disposition, she judges herself to be of better stock than most of the other patients. And she blubbers along about hogs, and health, and how to treat "colored" folks, and "white trash," and having a good attitude.

Across the room from Ruby Turpin sits Mary Grace, a pudgy teenager with bad blue acne and a sour scowl. She is reading a book and is annoyed by the chatty intrusion of Ruby. Finally closing the book she steams and simmers and stares at Ruby. And then ~ boom! Without warning Mary Grace whips her book across the room and beans Ruby on the head. Ruby falls dazed to the floor as Mary Grace flies across the room behind the book and hovers over her hissing into her ear,

*Go back to Hell where you came from, you old wart hog!*

That violent act is the raw beginning of Ruby's redemption. That violent act changes Ruby's internal conversation that eventually leads to some wrestling with God and an unforgettable vision of the Kingdom.

Boom! A book between the eyes!  
Boom! Beaned by revelation!  
Boom! The blunt trauma of the truth!

Imagine the scene.... The friends and neighbors of Jesus are gathering round anxious to hear what he will say and how he will say it. After all, preaching is part theater, part scholarship, part science, part spiritual, part art.

So, Jesus reads from Isaiah and proclaims that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, anointing him to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, and that the time has come. The scripture is filled full in their hearing! And, his kinfolk and fellow Nazarenes are duly impressed, as they say to one another, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

Now, there is no indication if that comment was offered in derision or in delight. There is no indication if they were stunned, or offended, or tickled pink. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" can mean a variety of things ~ based on inflection.

But, then Jesus pokes them in the eye with a stick.

Jesus recounts two episodes, recorded in First and Second Kings, in which Elijah and Elisha were instrumental in bringing God's deliverance from death and sickness to Gentiles. They were obscure stories where God's grace seemed to skip over the Jews and slosh all over the Gentiles. But, they were also stories that had an undercurrent of judgment or indictment. And, with that, the coming out party of Jesus takes a nasty turn.

There is a violent, blunt quality to this first sermon of Jesus. He throws the book at his neighbors and hits them right between the eyes. This is not the gentle savior who invites the children to come first or the master teacher who weaves a story with a surprising twist. There is no subtle light of dawning revelation. Jesus throws down the gospel gauntlet and then

as his neighbors blunder around with bewilderment and bemusement,  
while they weigh his words and his lineage,  
before they have time to let it sink it in,  
Jesus picks a fight.

He doesn't let their ethnocentric world view slowly surface.

He hits them with their own story.

He beans them with the book.

Now, my guess is that his friends and neighbors expected the same thing from a sermon on that Sabbath as you do on this Sabbath.

They expected him to tickle their minds and tug at their hearts.

They hoped for the gentle delivery of comforting words.

They hoped for a funny tale, or a unique spin, or an encouraging image.

They wanted a chewable chunk of theological meat salted with story and peppered with memorable lines, but what they got was preaching as provocative truth telling.

A divorced mother of three was dying of cancer. She had a son in junior high, a son in high school, and a daughter in college. She asked me to preach at her funeral. I was a young high school teacher and coach. I liked her kids; I think they liked me. I wanted to please, I wanted to be helpful, I wanted to comfort and encourage. So, as she lay dying on a hospital bed in her living room, I told her that I would preach at her funeral.

The funeral was at a downtown tall steeple church. The sanctuary was overflowing with kids. Her boys were cut out of Abercrombie and Fitch ads ~ hockey and soccer guys with chiseled good looks and too much braggadocio for their own good. But, at heart they were really likable guys. And, at heart they were broken and lost in a church packed full of their peers.

Jutting out over the congregation like the steeply pitched bow of a big boat the pulpit was high and lifted up. I climbed the ladder that led up to that perch, put down my papers and reached for the Bible, and ....

....and then lost my breath as I looked out over the sea of tear stained faces ~ tilted, expectantly, looking up. All of the ways in which they played adolescent-dress-up melted away; all of their own stories and issues seemed right on the surface. They were open, porous, and longing for a clear unmistakable word from God.

My words scratched on a couple sheets of paper suddenly seemed particularly paltry ~ pathetic. They didn't need the young teacher who wanted their approval. They needed a word from God. They didn't need some clever turn of phrase or some earnestly crafted image. They needed to encounter the Living God.

I think that's what they expected. Somehow, somewhere, deep down, they hoped that God would break silence and speak a word of grace. They hoped that a transcendent God would be present and that an elusive God would be unmistakable. They hoped that God would break in and speak. And, one vehicle for that in-breaking was preaching.

What do you expect in preaching?

When scripture is opened and proclaimed what can we rightly expect?

When we gather week to week, listening for the voice of God through the reading of scripture and its proclamation what are you hoping for, longing for, needing, expecting?

Is there some hope that you will be hit between the eyes?

Is there some longing ~ even if it makes you run me out to I-80 to toss me over the edge of the quarry ~ that the truth will be told?

Jesus cuts to the chase in his first sermon, and maybe with exasperation or impatience tells the truth:

There is a wideness to God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.

The distinctions that we create of class, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, creed and confession, are superseded by God's grace.

Mission is not just something that the church does, but mission is at the very heart of God. The mission of God is to gather humanity unto God.

And, to get to that truth Jesus references Elijah, and Elisha, and Isaiah.

He goes to scripture, because ....

The "good news to the poor" extends to the widow and the soldier.

The "freedom for the prisoners" extends to the unclean and the outsider.

The "recovery of sight for the blind" extends beyond the boundaries.

The "release of the oppressed" extends to the lowest rungs of the ladder.

The "year of the Lord's favor" extends to white trash and colored folks.

With his first sermon Jesus tells the truth, turns his friends and neighbors into a threatening mob, and casts a shadow of rejection that extends from Nazareth to Golgotha. There is an odd foreshadowing of the cross here...

They drive Jesus out of town and up a steep hill that they might throw him over the edge and then throw rocks on top of him ~ a familiar form of stoning. But, somehow Jesus gives them the slip and walks right through them. His own people deny him and would put him to death, but death can't hold him. He walks right through.

Maybe this is too cheap and easy, but can we say that the truth is told in preaching when it is rooted and wrestled in scripture and when the grace of God extends beyond the boundaries to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed, to you and me? Can we look to the first sermon of Jesus for that rubric? Scripture and grace. And, that despite the flaws and foibles of this preacher, or any preacher, that God still engages people through scripture and that grace keeps reaching out.....

It seems to me that we can rightly expect that preaching should change, challenge, expand, grow, offend, judge, and move us.... because the truth is not about our aspirations, and not even initially about our comfort, but about the Kingdom. The truth is about God's way in this world. The blunt and brutal truth:

God comes to love the last, the lost, the least, the other....

And, he calls us to do the same...

And, his way of doing that is through cross and grave....

And, he calls us to the same...

At the end of "Revelation," the short story by Flannery O'Connor, Ruby is home in the hog barn tussling with what happened, and there is this passage:

*Until the sun slipped behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she was absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. As last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of colored folks in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see on their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed*

*unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was immobile.*

*At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.*

And that is the truth.

Amen.