

Cliff Notes for Beginners©

Jeremiah 1:4-19; Luke 4:21-30

January 31, 2016

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This past week I challenged the guys in the men's bible study to help me come up with a sermon title. There were several intriguing titles – "You can't go home again;" "Just another prodigal son;" "Why don't you get why I'm here?"

"Blame it on the men" (not sure what that's about.) "Reading from the Cliff Notes;" and finally, they said, "We came up with a title. It'll be interesting to see if you come up with the same one."

I almost went with "You can't go home again." Jesus said, "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town." That was certainly true for Jesus.

When I was fresh out of seminary, I was eager to go home and preach for my church family who had given me so much solid foundation in the faith as I was growing up.

I had won the esteemed Worship Award, voted on by my peers and professors, as well as an award for excellence in Scripture reading. I admit, I was kind of proud of that. Humbly proud, if that's possible.

But mostly, being given those awards gave me confidence that the congregation in my home church would be proud of their newly ordained "daughter."

Well. My parents were proud. I think the pastor was, but he wasn't the pastor I grew up with. He was a friend of mine when I was in my teens. I'm really quite sure my pastor – Reverend Glenn Muncy – would have been proud.

But, the rest of the congregation? Let's just say they expressed more surprise at my call to preach than they did pride. So, the title "You can't go home again" was one I could relate to, and I'm pretty sure many of my colleagues had the same experience.

Back to the sermon titles ... I really liked the cliff note suggestion. But, I felt it needed a little tweaking. How many of you have ever used cliff notes while studying? They are shortened versions of different subjects – supposedly a little faster and easier to get the gist of the subject. I looked at a few cliff notes in seminary. If you are hurrying to comprehend something, they can come in handy, sometimes.

Do you think it strange how all these hometown folks went from awe to anger with Jesus, their hometown boy, and in such a short time? Why would they be so amazed with his authority when reading Scripture?

Why would they be so mesmerized with his very presence, and then when he starts talking, they turn on him. Really fast! And really, really, very angry. Right? Angry enough to hurl him off a cliff!

Of course, you have to admit, Jesus sounded like he was trying to push their buttons. He certainly wouldn't make a good politician, would he? He didn't try at all to woo them or tell them what they wanted to hear. No. He told them the opposite of what they wanted him to say – and do.

This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry and it doesn't appear that he is off to a great start. If we had to go by his hometown congregation's vote, he would be really low in the polls.

Maybe Jesus could have used some Cliff Notes for Beginners. Maybe he wouldn't have found himself standing at the edge of a cliff with a drop off behind him and an angry mob in front of him. Maybe.

So why were these devout Jews, who knew Jesus growing up, in such a rage?

Well, the trouble seems to come from their understanding of what Scripture says. That tends to cause friction among believers even today, doesn't it?

But, these were Jews. The chosen ones. The Israelites who had a long history with God. Their understanding was that God would send a Messiah – a King who would raise up a military and overtake those who had overtaken them.

See, when Jesus stood there reading from Isaiah, it was like he was saying HE, Jesus, was anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to restore sight to the blind, to release the oppressed – they were thinking strictly and exclusively – “he means US.”

But, when he began to explain that the good news was for others, as well – for Gentiles – that's what royally ticked them off. How could Gentiles who were pagans in their minds, who had other gods, who did not follow their Jewish rules or the commandments – how in the world could this man think God would extend grace to those hoodlums?

This was like - sacrilegious. It was blasphemy for Jesus (no matter that he grew up there) to act like he was speaking for God. Can you imagine the looks of dismay they gave Jesus and then each other before getting up in sheer rage and herding him out of the synagogue and out to the edge of the cliff?

I told you last week that this part two was a cliff hanger. Jesus is there, teetering at the edge while they ranted and raved. But somehow, maybe because they were so involved

in telling each other why this was justified, they didn't notice that Jesus walked through the crowd and left town. Poor Joseph and Mary! That must have been hard on them.

So, you can see why I titled this sermon "Cliff Notes for Beginners." But, it isn't really because Jesus needed some shortened guide for how to be the Messiah. It's more because Jesus was beginning his ministry as the Messiah and being on the edge of this cliff is just the beginning of ministry on the edge.

Jesus would face many more angry mobs in the next three years. While this crowd missed their opportunity to get rid of Jesus, we know that eventually, the mobs caught up with him and he was nailed to a cross.

And it would be so for his disciples as well. In fact, many people who chose to follow him would meet with angry mobs, would preach the good news to the poor and the oppressed, doing it all the while, right on the edge of persecution and death.

And here we are today. But, for quite a long time, we – at least here in the land of the free – have been quite a distance from any edge – at least with our faith. We have not experienced persecution; we have not been killed because we follow Jesus.

In fact, we've been so free that in some ways, I think it has made us kind of luke-warm, nonchalant about what we believe, about coming to church – or choosing to do something else. We are free to choose from a long menu of things to do and to believe and I don't think we have been very challenged about being disciples.

Until lately. And recently I've noticed a lot of things seem to be changing. We already know of a young mentally disturbed man who went to a church and prayed with believers and then stood up with his gun and shot them.

We know that in other countries there are terrorists who hate Christians and are persecuting them; killing them. I participated in a webinar – a seminar on the web – with our Presbyterians for Justice group who are located in Washington D.C.

Through that web we talked by Skype with a Syrian pastor who said their Christian congregation – what's left of them – meet in secret in an upstairs room, which is where he was when we Skyped.

But many of his members have fled. And some have been killed. They are frightened, but they are even more determined to meet and worship and study and be disciples in a country where they are the minority and where it is always ministry on the edge.

And I've come to realize as I read comments on different Facebook pages from people who call themselves Christian, that more and more are arguing about interpretation of Scripture. Some are very conservative and they take every word literally.

Some are more liberal in their interpretation of what the bible says. And they all express their own opinions, which is good, except they are so insulting of those who are different in their beliefs.

They are rude and hateful and it's just hard to imagine that God would extend grace to those who are so insulting, who are so sure that they are the only ones who are right. I hate to admit it, but I've found myself thinking "those people" can't really be Christians because of the way they act.

We can be very much like those hometown people in Nazareth. We don't want to think we are, but we have such a strong sense that our way is the right way, and if we aren't careful we just might find ourselves pushing grace over the cliff.

The ***New Interpreters Bible Commentary on Luke*** says: "The paradox of the gospel is that the unlimited grace that it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it. Jesus could not do more for his hometown because they were not open to him.

How much more might God be able to do with us if we were ready to transcend the boundaries of community and limits of love that we ourselves have erected?"

I think our question – and our challenge – is whether or not we choose (every day) to be Jesus' disciples, even if it means teetering on the edge much of the time; or are we in the other group – the ones who are indignant because God chooses to give grace even to those who believe differently than we do?

And are those "different" people Christians who see things through a very different lens when reading the gospel? Or are they people who do not even claim to be Christians at all? Muslims, perhaps?

If Jesus preaches good news for the poor; freedom for the oppressed; recovery of sight to the blind, and he proclaims it is for ALL people – including Gentiles – then we, today, must hear this word and rejoice in God's all encompassing love and grace.

The good news is for you! Grace upon grace. Forgiveness. Release from what holds you down in darkness.

But believe it, (because Jesus said it), the good news is for all – even those who are very different from us.

These are cliff notes for beginners. May they take us to every edge of every cliff that the Spirit of the Lords leads us to. And may our minds and hearts be opened for loving and sharing that grace with all whom He chooses to give it to.

Thanks be to God for the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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