

February 3 2013

Scripture Lessons *Jeremiah 1:4-10*

*Luke 4:21-30*

Sermon *“Cliff Hanger”*

Now I suppose there were cliff hangers before the advent of radio and television and the movies. In fact, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sometimes what were called ‘graphic novels’ and also magazines would publish stories of books and installments so that action adventures would leave you sort of ‘hanging’ so to speak until the next edition of the magazine came out and you could see how things were resolved. I am fairly certain that the name ‘cliff hanger’ can be traced back to the days of movie serials. How many of you are old enough to remember serials in the movie theatres before the feature came on, serials like the Perils of Pauline, and others where the hero or heroine would be literally be hanging from a cliff, until the next installment was shown. And then television networks picked up this when they left us hanging at the end of the production season on a series like “Dallas” with episodes like “who shot JR”, or even now with shows like “Lost” or “Heroes” which kind of unfolds like a serial would in the movies. Today’s lesson from Luke’s gospel introduces us to an earlier cliff hanger of a different sort. Jesus had been invited as was the custom in his day to read and comment ad hoc, sort of off the cuff on the lessons appointed for the day, from the prophet Isaiah, verses 1 & 2. As an adult Jewish male he would have been entitled to speak, but the added twist was, this was the synagogue in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. So he would have been known to a good many people and that would have added to the comfort level of letting him speak on that particular Sabbath. And yet by the end of the passage the same friendly home town crowd that had invited Jesus to speak had them nearly hanging over a cliff like the Perils of Pauline, ready to throw him off because they were enraged by what he had to say. The ending as we have seen is sort of anti-climactic – Jesus seems to just fade into the crowd, and miraculously walk away. But what had he done to enrage his former friends and neighbors and maybe even some of his relatives which led them to want to throw him off a cliff in anger? What could he have possibly said that would lead the people that he had grown up with to adulthood from childhood, and must have seen some inkling of his special nature to be filled, as Luke says rage about what he had to say. I think the answer to be honest, lies with three different places, first of all, in Jewish religious history, secondly our own human nature, and third our own false expectations. When Jesus

chose to make reference to Elijah and Elisha as was shared with us earlier, stories from the old testament, it was sort of like throwing gasoline on a fire, wonderful stories that contained great truths, they are about miracles performed outside of Israel among Gentiles which would have flown in the face of every red blooded Israelite as what he or she had been taught about their faith. Israelite's and rightly so had been taught for centuries of their chosen status in God's eyes. From Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to Moses in the exodus, God had chosen Israel for a very special purpose. But what had begun as a special purpose Jesus had seen in his time to become at least among the religious leadership, as a sense of entitlement, as a sense of arrogance, rather than purpose and humility. Jesus hints then at the fact God might not only have wider aims than Israel for the gospel, but that God is no respecter of persons and will plant seeds where seeds can be nurtured in the garden of life. This whole concept can fly in our faces, in Christians as well; it can go against the grain of our human nature too. Not only can we, like the Jewish leaders of this time, feel a sense of entitlement or special status because of our faith, our very nature as humans tells us that we want to be what the world considers the winning side of every argument in which we engage. And so we can want to put God in a kind of box, believing that God can only be on one side of an issue or another. On one side of a war or another. On one side of a discussion or another. One side of an argument or another. And of course that side is our side. But I think I am safe in assuming what Jesus is saying to us, what he was saying to his own Jewish brothers and sisters, God doesn't belong to anybody, and the minute that we in arrogance either because of our religious faith, or human nature to define who God is and what God is doing by our human standards we are liable to be very wrong indeed. So much for religious history and human nature, but what about false expectations? How do they fit into this story? Well the question the worshipers asked about is telling too. They asked this simple question. "Is this not Joseph's son?" In essence the question speaks volumes about the fact that a 30 year old man is standing before them, that in their minds has never grown or changed one bit, since he was a little kid. He should in other words, behave as the person that they have always known him to be as a child. And when Jesus rocks their expectations, anger and frustration erupt in his home town crowd. Their reaction reminds us that not only do we have to be careful about putting God in a box, but we have to be careful about putting each other in boxes as well. Can we all allow the past to be the past? And forgive the sins of our friends and neighbors? Can we allow for growth and maturity among our family? And among our friends and our fellow members in the church? Can we let people change for the better, or do

they always have to be the person I originally encountered, or who wronged me, or who messed up in the past and I never forgave them. Jesus I am afraid that he is telling us that if a prophet is not accepted in his own home town that this is a difficult and necessary thing for us to do. And so the question remains can we let the past be the past and forgive? Can we let people change and grow? Can we let God be God working among people and places and situations that God considers to be the important places? Can we avoid putting God and our neighbors in a box where they never change when we first got to know them? Avoid throwing Jesus over a cliff in essence as a result. Well I think our faith demonstrates that we can do all of these things. But it is not an easy thing to do. It takes a lot of thought. It takes a lot of sensitivity on our part. It takes a lot of diligence, it takes faith. But you know it is a cliff hanger, and we won't know until we see it how it all works itself out. Together we say, Amen.