

On the Precipice
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Luke 4: 16-32 – The rejection of Jesus by the people of Nazareth

Just three weeks back, I left Connecticut to go on a pilgrimage to Israel. When I first agreed to go, I was not sure what I would experience or why it would be important to me. To be honest, I just enjoyed the idea of traveling far away to a land I've never been and to immerse myself in a new culture. In just the first few days I felt welcomed by not only my own tour group but also by the people of Israel. For example, the hospitality set forth by each small restaurant was a sight to behold. The people who would host us for meals might not have much, but boy did they deliver on food. At each meal we would easily have 10 plates set out on the table of different middle eastern dishes – hummus, falafel, Israeli salad, labneh, shawarma, kebab, Jerusalem bread. People would even stop me in the streets and pull me into their tiny bakeries to give me a piece of Kanafah or Baklava. Food is the direct way to my heart, so believe me when I say I fell in love with this land and its people.

The bible passage today talks about Jesus visiting his hometown of Nazareth and preaching to his local synagogue. This encounter takes place relatively early on in his teaching career, so it makes sense for him to go to the place where it all started and check in with his friends and neighbors. He informs the people that he is the Messiah who will free captives, heal those who are injured, and proclaim the good news. "That's great!" the people say, and they realize he will save them from their turmoil. But then, Jesus informs them that not only is he here to provide help to Nazareth but to all people. Everyone is deserving of the good news, Jews, Gentiles, and sinners alike.

Well, this angers the people of Nazareth, and they drive him out of town and up to the peak of a mountain so that they may throw him down the cliff. They wanted to kill Jesus for his answer. I mean think about that, these people were so offended by his inclusivity that they believed he deserved to die. We all know that this isn't the end for Jesus, he walks away from his people and is never to return to Nazareth again. He then shows up in Capernaum, a nearby fishing village, the home of Simon Peter and many of the disciples. He begins to spread his gospel and the people believe him simply because he speaks like someone who knows what he's talking about and perhaps he is the one they have been waiting for.

I had the chance to walk up this mountain that's referenced in the scripture today and look over the cliffside. From the top, you can look out to the valley and see the town of Nazareth sitting below. Across the way you begin to also see the mountains of the Jezreel Valley. It is quiet and serene. The wind is strong and because you are so high up you could even see the faintest outline of the Jordan River. Its energy flows through you and as you sit upon the rock, you feel calm and secure.

I am terrified of heights, as many of my group members found out on this trip. I was nervous being so close to the edge. But that anxiety and fear almost melted away while we sat together and read this scripture passage. Our group leader, my good friend the Dr. Greg Gray, challenged us to reflect on this passage and how it may relate to our own lives.

There on the precipice, I thought deeply about my role in this world. You see, I have been struggling with my faith, especially during these past two years. Working in a hospital setting hasn't been easy during COVID. At Yale New Haven Hospital, our floors are often packed to the brim with patients. Our emergency departments are utilizing hallways and empty storage

rooms for patient beds. We health care workers have run ourselves ragged. Sometimes our patience runs thin.

As a medical social worker, I've tried my best to find resources and assistive programs for my patients, but it is nearly impossible when everything around you has either closed or is inaccessible for our most impoverished patients. I have had to tell many of my patients and their families that I simply cannot help them. And for someone who has always made helping others a priority, this has been devastating on my mental health.

I imagine what Jesus might have felt in that moment he was almost thrown from the cliff. The man is about to perform miracles all over the land. He is working to spread the gospel, but when those who he has known all his life find out that he isn't just performing for them, they turn on him. They attempt to kill him. But Jesus doesn't argue with them. He doesn't attempt to pacify them or tell them lies to cover up the situation. He just leaves. Jesus knew that this was not the moment when he would die. He had more plans for the world. The disappointment and anger of those who knew him best did not deter him from continuing his spread his message. I think about the determination he must have had to continue his work, and it gives me hope.

After the last 18 months or so, as I witnessed first-hand the breakdown of a healthcare system, it's hard to imagine anything changing for the better. Most days I struggle to believe that the system will ever improve in our patients favor. That's when everything feels bleak and it's easy to lose motivation in the work. But who among us hasn't struggled with these feelings?

When we are on the precipice, what will we do? Will we succumb to our worries and fears and give up? Or will we persevere? Jesus teaches us that the welfare of all people is worth

fighting for. Doing the work will present us with challenges, but we must move past those issues for the greater good.

My hope for you is that you to continue to your work, no matter how difficult the world makes it out to be. Each one of you brings something good to someone out there. Every day, you change someone's life for the better. Those little victories are what makes you important. You are needed. Never stop fighting for what you believe will bring good to this world, even if it feels sometimes like it is pushing you off a cliff.

My patients need me to continue to advocate for them. I can only do what is within my power and there is much I cannot control. What I can do is continue to provide support and resources to the best of my ability. Someone out there will benefit from my work. Someone out there needs my support. Even if my interventions bring no massive change, people will still appreciate feeling heard and respected.

Jesus' example teaches us to expect the occasional uphill battle, setback, and rejection. As we continue into the new season God has given us, I hope we recommit to following Jesus wherever he leads us. Even now, his is a mission of healing, restoration, and spiritual freedom. The Spirit God put on him is now upon everyone who follows. Amen.