

“To the Brink”  
1 Kings 17:8-16; Romans 11:1-6;  
Luke 4:21-30

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Wow! That was their first response. They were amazed. Wow! What gracious words. How he spoke about good news for the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. At least, that was the first reaction. Then there was that statement: “Isn’t he Joseph’s son?” And there begins to be a shift in the whole sense of what’s going on.

I’m assuming Jesus is just beating them to the punch, or speaking out what was beginning to go through folks’ minds—if you’re such a hot shot, why don’t you do something here? There’s that sense of whether they can really hear him, because isn’t he just Joseph’s son? He didn’t ever go away to Harvard or Yale. Can he be the one that can speak to us like this? He didn’t go through the rabbinical temple’s school. How can he say this is fulfilled?

He begins to speak what they are thinking. He begins to press in on what is going on. It begins, I think, with that idea that he’s just one of us, how can he say these things. Then he goes on with the audacity to say that God cares about these other folks out here. Look at it historically. Look at our story of Elijah, with the widow in Zarephath, which is outside of Israel in Sidon. It wasn’t part of the Promised Land. God sent Elijah there and worked there, cared for her.

God healed Naaman; an Assyrian from a kingdom just north, through Elisha. If you read the story, the king of Israel is really afraid that Naaman is coming because he’s a great general. Naaman is coming to be healed and the king thinks “he’s just made up that reason and is really coming to fight us.” So the king is really nervous, and Elisha tells the king, “Just send him to me,” and he heals this military man from up north who was supposedly the enemy.

It’s an amazing thing Jesus has just done. In the midst of coming into his hometown, he begins talking about the world out there and how God has always cared. Perhaps we should have read Jonah today, as well, because it seems that he’s encouraging, pressing against them to help them think beyond themselves. That’s a hard thing to do.

It feels like it’s the human way of doing things to create our tribe, create our group, our set of folks, and we want that set of folks to be the ones that are fine, have what they need. We’re the ones who are favored. We don’t have to think about the other. It’s so easy to set up an “us” and a “them.” Jesus is coming to his “us” and saying, “What about them?” Really? The enemy from up north? The poor from somewhere else? God cares enough to heal and save?

What would it be like if Jesus were to come here and press us in that way? What would he say? Would he say black lives matter? Muslim lives matter? Syrian refugee's lives matter? The Middle Eastern people's lives matter? Asian or Central American people's lives matter? We could go around the world. But what if it's not just out there? He says he wants to release good news to the poor. We're not far from poor here, and yet it's so easy to simply isolate and make it about myself, my group. I'm pretty good about self-justification. I'm pretty good at saying, "I know why I deserve this." I know why we deserve God's love. It's a little harder, sometimes, to say why somebody else deserves God's love.

It's easy to be imbedded in my group and think that we are what's important, and when somebody tells me differently, I get defensive. I struggle with that. It's easy to want to be part of my group enough that what I can do is bash the other group so that I can show that I really am best with this group.

Or sometimes it just feels bad. Anger comes up, or fear, or worry. Is Jesus pressing these folks into that place? Look what it says they do. It says they are filled with rage. That's pretty strong language. They grab him and take him to the brink of the hill. What does that say about the human way of solving problems? I feel like it's all too easy for me to go there, too. It's that fight response. It's that violence, and perhaps a prefiguring of the way we will deal with Jesus in the end. They are angry. They take Jesus to the brink of the hill. It's pretty easy to see that in myself if I get pressed about caring for another or thinking about the other.

It's so easy to let my envy, my jealousy, my pride, my self-centeredness lead me to a place where I just want to fight with the other. I want to throw them off the brink. If I were Jesus standing on the brink of the hill with those people wanting to throw me off, I would be so tempted to just flatten them. So it seems to me as they are there on the brink wanting to throw Jesus off, it's almost like somebody must be giving a speech about what they must do next, and Jesus just walks away. He walks away down the hill and out of their lives and they are left holding their anger, their fear.

It's the same question for me. Do I simply want to be left holding my anger and my fear, or do I want to walk after the one who can take me somewhere else? It's easy to get to the brink, but to keep our eye on Jesus and to walk away, that's a different thing. It feels to me like a continually letting go. It's recognizing that this fear and anger that I hold, I have to turn from it to follow Jesus. I don't know exactly where he's going all the time, but I know he's got the answers. I know he's got what I need. I know he's got grace. And there are those times when it is so clear to me that I don't. I need him. Amen.