

Book 'em: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 27, 2004

In Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation," Ruby Turpin is sitting in the doctor's waiting room, evaluating each person around her. Ruby judges herself to be superior, by more than a grade or two, to everyone there, especially to a poor, unkempt, teenaged wretch seated across from her who is reading a book. Ruby thinks it sad that the girl's parents did not groom her more attractively. Perish the thought of having a child as scowling as this one.

As for the "ugly" child, Mary Grace, she listens for a while as Ruby chatters outloud about the superiority of poor blacks over "white trash." Then, without warning, Mary Grace fixes her steely eyes on Ruby and hurls her book across the room. The book hits Ruby in the head and she falls to the floor with Mary Grace on top of her hissing into her ear, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!"

This, says O'Connor, is the violent, shocked beginning of Ruby's redemption, the catalyst for her repentance and her heavenly vision. Revelation often begins when a large book hits you on the head.

Now, the Bible is a violent book. That's good, because we are very violent people. Something about our system of government makes an average of 2,000 New Yorkers want to kill one another. This is the system that we graciously offer to the people of Iraq.

But in Luke 4, in Jesus' sermon in Nazareth, the violence is different. Here the violence is due not to the aspirations of American democracy or lust for national security, but rather to Jesus. All the Gospels agree that from the moment Jesus sets foot in the pulpit, things get nasty.

A friend of mine returned from an audience with His Holiness the Dali Lama. "When his Holiness speaks," my friend said, "everyone in the room becomes quiet, serene and peaceful." Not so with Jesus. Things were fine in Nazareth until Jesus opened his mouth and all hell broke loose.

And this was only his first sermon! One might have thought that Jesus would have used a more effective rhetorical strategy, would have saved inflammatory speech until he had taken the time to build trust, to win people's affection, to contextualize his message—as we are urged to do in homiletics classes.

No, instead he threw the book at them, hit them right between the eyes with Isaiah, and jabbed them with First Kings, right to the jaw, left hook. Beaten, but not bowed, the congregation struggled to its feet, regrouped and attempted to throw the preacher off a cliff. And Jesus “went on his way.”

And what a way to go. In just a few weeks, this sermon will end, not in Nazareth but at Golgotha. For now, Jesus has given us the slip. Having preached the sovereign grace of God—grace for a Syrian army officer or a poor pagan woman at Zarephath—Jesus demonstrates that he is free even from the community that professes to be people of the Book. The Book and its preachers are the hope of the community of faith, not its pets or possessions. Perhaps the church folk at Capernaum won't put up such a fight. Jesus moves on, ever elusive and free.

Those of us who have been trained to make rhetorical peace with the congregation marvel at the freedom of Jesus to preach over their heads, to wound in order to heal, to use their own beloved texts against them. How sly of the common lectionary to pair this linguistic assault by Jesus at Nazareth with Paul's pretty words on love. Poor preachers. Sometimes we love our people in the name of Christ, enduring just about everything with them, and sometimes we love them by throwing the Book at them. No wonder young Jeremiah resisted when God called him to “speak whatever I command you.” Smart boy, Jeremiah.

Kierkegaard noted that many great minds of his century had given themselves to making people's lives easier—inventing labor-saving machines and devices. He said that he would dedicate himself to making people's lives more difficult. He would become a preacher.

In a seminar for preachers that I led with Stanley Hauerwas, one pastor said, in a plaintive voice, “The bishop sent me to a little town in South Carolina. I preached one Sunday on the challenge of racial justice. In two months my people were so angry that the bishop moved me. At the next church, I was determined for things to go better. Didn't preach about race. But we had an incident in town, and I felt forced to speak.

“The board met that week and voted unanimously for us to be moved. My wife was insulted at the supermarket. My children were beaten up on the school ground.”

My pastoral heart went out to this dear, suffering brother. Hauerwas replied, “And your point is what? We work for the living God, not a false, dead god! Did somebody tell you it would be easy?”

Not one drop of sympathy for this brother, not a bit of collegial concern. Jesus moves right on from Nazareth to Capernaum, another Sabbath, another sermon, where the congregational demons cry out to him, “Let us alone!” (Luke 4:34). But he won’t, thank God. He is free to administer his peculiar sort of grace, whether we hear or refuse to hear. This is our good news.

As for us preachers: “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow.” (Jer. 1:10)—with no weapon but words.