

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
“On the Road Again: Rough Starts”
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Isaiah 61:1-11, Luke 4:21-30

The second lesson for today follows directly on the heels of what Pastor John presented last week in his sermon about first steps. Jesus is in the synagogue in his hometown and reads a section of scripture from Isaiah, the same section we just heard read in our first lesson. Jesus closes the scroll and says.

READ LUKE 4:21-30

These beginning steps of Jesus escalate rather quickly into a very rough start. It can be confusing to us to understand why this scene escalates from the people being amazed at how wise Jesus is, to wanting to throw him off a cliff. The core of this interaction is caused by the relationship this town has with Jesus.

These people know Jesus. They had been there to see Jesus learn how to walk, they remembered when sentences were new to him and the words didn't come out in the right order. They saw his awkward adolescence phase and witnessed many firsts and failures of Jesus' life. They know Jesus; or do they?

Recently they have begun to hear different stories about Jesus. Some are saying he can heal people. There are some stories about inspiring teachings and great insights about God. They are excited Jesus stood up today in the synagogue because they finally get to see if these rumors from Capernaum are true.

If the town knows Jesus, then Jesus also knows the people in this town, too. Jesus has heard the men joke behind the backs of the soldiers, “We will see who is tough when the messiah comes.” Jesus has played the children's games in the streets where the messiah wins great battles against their enemies. Jesus has heard the stories of how wonderful life will be once the messiah arrives. No more hunger or pain, only peace, and health. Jesus knows what they expect from their messiah.

Drawing out these relationships allows us to see how this is a bit more like a stand-off than a happy homecoming. On one side, Jesus has faced the devil in the wilderness. He has been baptized and is ready to begin his ministry in the way he has been called to serve the world. On the other side, the people have been waiting for generations for a messiah and the rumors hint that maybe Jesus, one of their very own, is the long-awaited savior.

The stories they have told and retold about prophets being sent by God to save the people might be happening before their eyes. They desperately desire to be a part of that story. When Jesus stands up to read they all think this is it, this is their time to be part of the story.

Jesus knows the town too though and he knows they are missing a key detail about how God works in the world. He uses two of their beloved stories to show them, as gently as he can, what his ministry will be about. He reminds them that the widow Elijah is sent to help is a foreigner, even while the widows in their community continue to suffer. The leper Elisha is sent to heal is the commander of the enemy's army. God's favor is not just for the chosen, it is for everyone.

It is suddenly clear to the town that this is not going to be the grand homecoming filled with miracles that Jesus' neighbors wanted. It sounds like Jesus is NOT going to destroy their enemy but might

actually be thinking about helping them. This is not their messiah and they are not going to stand around and let this kid from their town head out to help their enemies. The vibe switches instantly and they begin driving Jesus towards the cliff. A very rough start for Jesus indeed.

I would love to be able to say if you get the right map, pack the right things, have all the credentials, and everything is perfectly planned the journey goes smoothly. But if Jesus doesn't even get that, I don't think we should be expecting anything easier. Rough starts are going to be a part of our experience too.

But the great news is we get to see how Jesus handles rough starts. This is just one of the rough patches Jesus hits in his ministry. And I think if we collected them all we begin to see a pattern in how Jesus handles rough starts.

He gives everyone a chance.
He believes who people show him they are.
He knows when to establish boundaries.

The first thing Jesus does is he gives everyone a chance. He knew how this synagogue reading was going to go. He knew the worldview his town held and he knew what they expected from their messiah. They wanted someone to show up and squash the enemy and raise their chosen family to all seats of power. Jesus knew that was not what he was offering them, but he gave them a chance anyway.

This month I came across a video of a person crying. They had just come out as non-binary to their conservatively religious family. The tears made me assume the moment did not go well, but to my astonishment the parents had responded, "We love you, we want you to be happy." It was a huge risk but this person gave them a chance and it paid off in the best way.

Jesus probably knew how that reading in the synagogue was going to go but he gives his hometown a chance to be with him anyway. Unfortunately, they are not. Given the chance, they choose to turn against Jesus. As they back him up against the cliff, Jesus does not soften his message and re-explain what he meant. He doesn't reason with them or begs them to think this through. He takes their reaction at face value and silently slips away. He believes them when they show him who they are.

I have been blessed to have many friends who have been with me from preschool to now. Others have come and gone as life changes. Others though, I had to honestly see who they were and realize they were not on my side anymore. It is hard to make those calls because we remember the good times. We want to give them second and third chances because they have helped in other chapters of our lives. The best practice though is to believe people when they show you who they are. People can say all sorts of things but their actions will always tell you who they are.

Once Jesus gives the town a chance and they show him who they are, Jesus establishes boundaries to protect himself and the people who will join his ministry. We can see these boundaries in Matthew's gospel. Now Matthew does not include this scene in the synagogue. I don't think he wanted to show the rough start, but he does show us the boundaries Jesus makes around the people of his hometown. Early on in Matthew's gospel Jesus' mother and siblings show up wanting to speak with Jesus. He replies, "Who is my mother, who is my brother?" It's one of those harsh truth moments from Jesus, but when we factor in what he experienced the last time he was probably with them, the harsh reply looks more like a healthy boundary. They were not with him when he gave them a chance so he has spent his energy developing relationships with people who are with him.

Jesus' reaction to his rough start is helpful to us today. It encourages us to give everyone a chance. We may think we know what the outcome will be but until we give someone a chance we don't

know for sure. Everyone deserves a chance to show us who they are. And when they do, we believe what we are shown through their actions. When those actions are not helping you walk your journey with God or helping you become the person you were created to be, establish boundaries.

The truth of boundaries is that they may feel hurtful but they actually give someone another chance to show us who they are. Do they respect your boundaries or do they try to manipulate their way around your boundaries? Either way, you have again given them a chance to show you who they are and you have more information to establish appropriate boundaries again. We can always amend our boundaries if someone proves they have changed. Jesus does reconcile with his mother and possibly a few of his siblings. They must have shown Jesus they had changed and are willing to defend him should a mob arise again. When they showed him that, he adjusted his boundaries to welcome them in.

Or maybe we find ourselves on the outside of someone else's boundaries. That absolutely feels terrible. We may want to push back or take offense that they are not as open to us as before. Knowing, though, that boundaries are a part of Jesus' ministry, we realize boundaries are not a punishment. They are feedback about how we are showing up for the people in our lives. They are another chance for us to grow and be better.

We give everyone a chance, and we keep a lookout for moments when we are given a free chance. We believe who people show us they are, and we show up for other people to show them who we are. We establish appropriate boundaries, and respect the boundaries of others. So that second and third chances are possible. With this framework we ensure that rough starts are just that. Starts. They do not mean an unnecessary end. Rough starts are starts that lead to the greater journey.