

“All Beginnings Are Difficult”  
February 2, 2025

Amos 7:10-15  
Luke 4:16-30

The beginning of a new year.

The beginning of a new semester.

The beginning of a new legislative session in Iowa.

The beginning of a new presidency.

Rabbi Ishmael taught in the Talmud: “All beginnings are difficult.”

They are.

We adjust to writing 2025—perhaps a little surprised to find ourselves a quarter of the way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century already.

We adjust to new class locations and new professors or new students.

We hear, perhaps with concern, about new laws proposed in Des Moines.

And the chaos across the nation that followed the executive order freezing federal spending last week was compared by some to the chaos following the ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries eight years ago.

All beginnings are difficult. So, too, is the slow process of gaining our bearings once more.

In the middle of the week, someone asked me: “What’s going on?”

I don’t think he was really asking for my expert assessment of the situation—I certainly *hope* not—because in the difficulty of beginnings, it’s always hard to say what’s going on.

If I can speak personally for a moment, I will say that preaching in these days of new beginnings is difficult. And maybe it’s difficult to listen to sermons in these days as well. Many in our congregation are worried about what is happening in our nation and what might happen next. And those concerns are brought to worship and to our life together.

In these days, I don’t want to make everything about politics. So, it seemed good to me to choose to center my preaching this month before the *beginning* of Lent on the stories about the *beginning* of the ministry of Jesus. It seemed good just to walk along with Jesus as he preaches and calls followers and heals. It seemed that it would be an easy, comforting walk.

Of course, I'm finding out once more—and I should have known this—I'm finding out once more that when we walk along with Jesus, he usually takes us someplace unexpected, maybe even someplace we'd rather not go.

I don't want every sermon, every worship service to raise political issues. But then, this morning, in the story about the very *beginning* of Jesus' ministry, he speaks of wealth and poverty, of the fate of prisoners, of wholeness and healing.

And I looked ahead a little bit. Spoiler alert for anyone reading the Gospels: Jesus talks about welcoming the stranger, about feeding the hungry, about taxes. And he often calls out the leaders of his day.

Is Jesus talking about “political” issues? Perhaps. The political process is the way that communities and nations organize their common life, allocate their resources, and deal with shared problems. Politics is about the values we honor, the money we allocate, the process we follow so that we can live together with some measure of justice, order, and peace.

My sense is that in talking about such things, Jesus is also talking about “spiritual” issues—explorations of how we live out our lives of faith in a world that can be brutal and unloving—and surprisingly filled with occasions of grace and mercy as well.

There's a connection, then between the spiritual and the political—but it's not always obvious or easy to tease out. We work on it—and as with most things, we never get it completely right. But we remember that for people of faith, concern with politics is never simply about the triumph of one party or another. It is one way that we try to plow God's wholeness into the soil of our history.

So, I want to ask you to walk along with me this month because I could use your company in the unexpected turns that this walk with Jesus might take.

Listening, to the Gospel of Luke, we might think that beginnings are no problem at all. After being baptized by John in the Jordan River, after a time of testing in the wilderness, Jesus returns to his hometown. He comes to the synagogue in Nazareth.

This is Joseph and Mary's son, a familiar member of the community. He is becoming known as teacher who is being talked about by everyone.

Luke gives us a picture of Jesus the Jew. He lives out of the tradition in which he was raised, honoring the Sabbath day, worshipping God along with the rest of the community. We must always remember, when we hear about Jesus and his confrontations with the religious authorities, that both Jesus and his earliest followers were Jewish and sought to be faithful to the God of the Covenant. His arguments with the leaders and the people are not condemnations of Judaism or Jewish people. They are more like disagreements within a family.

This Jewish Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah: “God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

We need words like this. We especially need words like this today because, well, because it’s still winter and it’s a time of beginnings

The cold and the snow and the ice let up just enough and our cars are coated with a mix of sand and salt. Some people go to the car wash. Others depend on the rain and make abundant use of wiper fluid. You can see on some cars how their wipers carve an arc of clarity out of an encrusted window.

Those grimy windshields, including my own, are to me an image of the life of faith, including my own. Our sight becomes blurred. Our purposes and goals become obscured. As individuals and as a congregation we can get caught up in self-preoccupation, captive in shadowed prisons of our own making. We reduce the vastness of the Christian faith down to something small and tired and predictable. Oh, it’s comfortable—but not very liberating.

It helps, then, to be reminded of the great hope of the prophets: release for the captive, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed—something far more than our little selves and our little plans.

Jesus reads the words from the scroll of Isaiah that come as good news.

Hearing Jesus, all the people speak well of him.

And yet, I hear these words as words of judgment—or at least as words of caution.

My calling, after all, is to “speak well of Jesus.” I work hard at it. Each Sunday and throughout the week, I’m expected to put in a good word for Jesus, to commend him to others.

But we know how this story ends, don’t we?

The same people who were speaking well of Jesus listen a little more to what he has to say. He reminds them that often their ancestors—*his own ancestors*—missed what God was doing in their midst. He reminds them that God’s favor is often with the outsider.

We keep hearing this theme as we read through Luke’s gospel: God is concerned with those who live on the margins. Those who are ill and those who are foreigners, the despised and disregarded, often receive or show the love of God more than those on the inside track.

As the people listen further to Jesus, as they take in what the hometown boy is saying, they become “filled with wrath”—a great biblical phrase that means they were really angry—angry enough to kill. The people who speak well of Jesus want to throw him off a cliff as soon as he says something they don’t like.

And here we are.

We can all speak well of Jesus.

At the same time—admit it—we’d just as soon throw him over the cliff when our values and our lifestyles are threatened by his words and his actions:

When Jesus suggests that the quest for more and more things might be keeping us from loving God and neighbor—**THROW HIM OFF A CLIFF!**

When Jesus suggests that our labeling people “good” and “bad,” “acceptable” or “unacceptable” might be contrary to God’s way of seeing—**THROW HIM OFF A CLIFF!**

When Jesus suggests that we confront evil in the world rather than look the other way or passively accept it—**THROW HIM OFF A CLIFF!**

“Crucify him.” That’s where this story is going. And all of us—those who preach, those who listen, those who would speak well of Jesus—we are all ready to join in as soon as we hear something we don’t like.

So, I love the ending to that story in Luke.

The angry crowd rises up. We take Jesus out of the city and lead him to the brow of the hill in order to throw him down headlong.

What happens next is one of those *strange* incidents that keep people from opening their Bibles.

What happens next is a mystery, and one that points to the ways of God in our world and our lives: Jesus walks straight through the crowd and goes on his way.

How did that happen? I have no idea. *That* it happened seems perfectly in line with who Jesus was and who the living Christ is and how he works among those of us who are foolish enough to want to walk along with him.

The way of Jesus Christ is his own way—and all the hatred, anger, and violence of the world will not stop him from going on that way. Even death will not stop him for his life is a witness to a love that is stronger than death. Christ will continue on the way of life giving love whether or not we choose to be a part of that way.

But here and there, now and then, we do find the grace to follow—individually, as a congregation.

But here and there, now and then, we find Christ working among us, giving us strength where we are weak, courage where we are cowardly, helping us to love when hating would be so much easier and would feel so good.

The living Christ goes on his own way. In this time of beginning, may we—all of us who would rather toss him off a cliff—be so transformed by the love of God that we too might follow on Christ's way of love.