

“Throwing the Book at Us”

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-30

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Kyle Childress

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 girl who is sitting across from her reading a book. Ruby thinks it is 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 this so-called unkempt, and “ugly” child, whose name is Mary Grace, she listens for a while as Ruby chatters out-loud, whether anyone is listening or not, about the superiority of this class of people over that class of people. Ruby especially considers “white trash” as inferior. Then, without warning, Mary Grace fixes her steely eyes on Ruby and hurls her book across the room, hitting Ruby in the head, who falls to the floor. Mary Grace jumps on top of her hissing in her ear, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!”

This, says O’Connor, is the shocked beginning of Ruby’s redemption, the catalyst for her repentance, and her vision of heaven she has by the end of the story. This is the grace of God, this large book hitting her in the head.

Revelation from God often begins when a large book hits us on the head.

The Bible is a large book. And it does not often hit us on the head but occasionally it does. Sometimes it takes that for us to hear what God wants to say to us. Both Scripture lessons today from the lectionary are about people hearing the Bible and hearing it in different ways. But in both stories, the Bible is heard as if it hit them in the head.

Here in Luke 4, is the first sermon Jesus ever preached. All of the Gospels agree that from the moment he sets foot in the pulpit, things get nasty. Jesus takes the big old Bible and hits those hometown folk right between the eyes with it. And they don't like it.

Jesus has been at nearby rival village Capernaum healing people. He returns home to Nazareth and goes to the synagogue like he always has done on the Sabbath. He stands to read the appointed Scripture for the day, a text from the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* (The year of the Lord's favor is the Jubilee proclaimed in Lev. 25, when all debts are canceled, all slaves are set free, and all land reverts back to the original owner.) Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant, and sat down. Everyone waited for his commentary, which always comes after reading the text. They waited. It was the lectionary text for the day and everyone knew that someday, in heaven, all that Jesus had read would come true. In heaven or someday when the Messiah returned. But then Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Everyone gasped. “That’s pretty bold of him! Who does he think he is, the Son of God or something? He sounds like he thinks he’s the Messiah.” Someone else piped up, “What’s this about setting the prisoners free? We’re going to need better locks on our doors and security systems with all of these convicts running around. Everybody had better get a gun. And what about the poor people? They’re just lazy. Good news for them is just more handouts!” One old codger said, “Joseph’s boy has some growing up to do to see how the real world works.”

Then Jesus spoke some more. *Listen to me. No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.* The particular word Jesus uses here is interesting. The word we translate “hometown” is the word, “pratis,” from which we get words like patriotism, patriot, patriotic. “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s patriotic home.” The best way to translate what Jesus is saying is to watch what happens.

He goes on with his sermon by referring to two of the great prophets of Israel, Elijah, and Elisha. The first, Elijah was sent by God to a poor widow in Zarephath in Sidon. Jesus says that even though there were many poor widows in Israel, God sent Elijah to this foreign woman. This is found in I Kings 17. Then he goes on with his sermon by talking about Elisha who, even though there were many lepers in Israel, God sent Elisha to Naaman the Syrian. This is found in II Kings 5. Even though both of these stories were in the Bible, their Bible and ours, when the people of his hometown heard this, they were filled with rage. They were not simply offended; they were not mad, and they didn’t grumble, gripe or fuss. No, they became so enraged that they rose up, drove him out of the synagogue and tried to lynch him by throwing him off of the cliff on the edge of town! Their own

Jesus! Joseph's boy! His own synagogue and his own hometown!

These people, who profess to be the “people of the Book,” professing to be Bible-believing people, become enraged when he uses the very same Bible to challenge their patriotism. He challenges their “God and Country” with these Bible stories of God's grace that extends beyond the boundaries of their country and beyond what they think their God is about, even though it is in the Bible. My heavens, you would have thought that Jesus suggested that God loves black people just like Americans (to paraphrase Sen. Mitch McConnell), or that Jesus recommended that we receive undocumented workers from Mexico, and that God blesses other people besides Americans!

In 1950 in South Georgia, the Rehoboth Baptist Church, outside of Americus, decided that Clarence and Florence Jordan should be kicked out of the church because they had black people living and working and eating alongside white people on their farm that the Jordans called Koinonia, Greek for “fellowship.” A group of deacons came to see Clarence, who had a PhD in the Greek New Testament from Southern Seminary. Clarence handed a Bible to one of the men and said that he and Florence would be glad to leave the church and apologize to the church for offending them, if any of the men could show in the Bible how any wrong had been committed. The man slammed the book down and said, “Don't give me any of this Bible stuff!” Clarence softly said, “I'm not giving you any Bible stuff. I'm asking you to give it to me.” He then suggested to the deacon that if he could not accept the Bible as the “Holy, inspired Word of God,” then perhaps he should not only not be a deacon, but he should get out of the

Baptist church himself. Well, the men left angrily.

Jesus not only gave the Bible stuff to them, he threw the book at them and hit them right between the eyes with Isaiah, then slammed them with I Kings 17, and followed up with a swift II Kings 5. Beaten, but not bowed, the congregation struggled to its feet, regrouped and tried to throw the preacher off a cliff. Luke says, Jesus “went on his way.”

And what a way to go. It won't be long but this sermon of Jesus' will end, not in Nazareth, but at Golgotha, on the cross. But at this moment, Jesus has slipped by and goes back to nearby Capernaum. Maybe they won't put up such a fight over there.

When we open up this old book, we had better watch out. It might hit us squarely between the eyes.

In our Old Testament reading from Nehemiah 8, the people are just returning from exile. Over the last hundred years, the people of God have been in Babylon where they have had no power and no identity. For the last one hundred years they have had very little teaching of their faith and for the last one hundred years they have heard next to nothing of the Scriptures, the Torah.

Nehemiah 8 tells of the people who have straggled into Jerusalem. Once this had been a great and beautiful city. The king's palaces were there, and many public buildings; it was a city teeming with life and commerce. And more than anything else, this was the city of the great Temple, which had been built by Solomon about

400 years before. When the Babylonians came in 587 BC they destroyed the Temple and burned most of the city, carrying off many people into exile, especially the best and brightest. Now, the remnant has returned and there is nothing but rubble where once the Temple had been. They gather in one of the cleared-off public places near what was called the Water Gate. And the rabbi Ezra reads the Torah, the Scripture, their version of the Bible. All day the Scripture is read and all day it is interpreted and all day they listen.

But it is as if Ezra took the big, old Bible and threw it at them, hitting them squarely between the eyes. The people weep in response. They weep because these are the words for which they have hungered and thirsted. They weep from grief, and they weep from consolation.

Tony Campolo tells a story from the early 90's of a friend of his who was a pastor in Brooklyn who was on call to do funerals with a local funeral home when there was no one else to do the funeral. Once the pastor was called to do the funeral for a young gay man who had died from AIDS. The pastor did the service and then did the graveside service, as well. He said that gathered there were the friends of the young man who had died, most of them were gay and many of them were HIV positive. No one had said anything but had looked on impassively. Finally, the pastor asked if anyone would like to say something. After a pause, one man spoke up and asked, "Would you read the Twenty-third Psalm? I thought the Twenty-third Psalm is always read at funerals." And the pastor read, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. ..."

Then someone asked, "Would you read the part

about nothing can separate us from the love of God?” And the pastor read Romans 8. “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come. Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And as he read, the men began to cry. And one by one they made requests to hear Scriptures read and they wept in response.

Two stories from the Bible today about two different responses to the reading and preaching of the Bible. In one the people respond with anger and in the second they respond with grief and consolation. You never know what’s going to happen when you open this old book.

Kierkegaard said 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.

I want to say to you this morning that is not only the calling of a preacher; it is also the calling of all of us. God does not call us, address us in this big, old book, and address us most clearly in his Son Jesus Christ, to make our lives easier. God addresses us to make us faithful. And in so doing it will most often make our lives more difficult.

And our presence in this old world, is not to make the world easier. The body of Christ exists to show people another way, to show the Way of God in

Jesus – the Way that is good news for people who are in poverty. The Way that is liberation to the prisoners and convicts; the Way that recovers sight to the blind, and sets the oppressed free. And it is the Way that proclaims the Jubilee, which means there are other ways to do economics. Much of the time, we will make other people’s lives more difficult, and it will make our own more difficult, too – if we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing.

When we open this old book, who knows what might happen.

It is not supposed to be easy.

In Luke, Jesus slips out of the clutches of the mob in his hometown Nazareth to head over to Capernaum. The next Sabbath, he is in the synagogue again and reads and preaches the Bible again, and the congregational demons cry out to him, “Let us alone! Get out of here!”

But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus will not leave us alone whether we like it or not.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.