

# Jedediah Webb: Circuit Rider

## Chapter 6

### Spring 1878

I made a circuit run in the early Spring of 1878 – late February and March. Jeremiah had expressed an interest in accompanying me on this circuit so he could experience what it was like to ride a circuit. He also wanted a chance to meet some people of color north and west of Dublin and possibly serve them as a circuit rider. I was excited that he wanted to go with me. We would have a chance to catch up with each other and have an enjoyable time on the trail. I packed up Rahab and Sadie with the winter gear, and Jeremiah packed up his horse, Esther. It is not uncommon for preachers to name their animals after Biblical characters. Jeremiah admired Esther from the Bible as she saved many of the Jews from being exterminated by the Persians. He told me that he and Esther were going to do their best to save his people - recently freed slaves - from the persecutions that they face.

I have a severe problem with people who mistreat Black people. President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. In Texas, the slaves were not recognized as freed from slavery until June 19, 1865 – some two years later. Even 15 years after the Black people were freed, they are still not accepted as equals by many Whites. This has been made apparent to me repeatedly as I hear negative comments from White people about the Black people. I don't hold back on my feelings about this in my sermons, and I know this does not make me popular with some of my congregants. However, I choose to build my life on the solid foundation of Jesus' teachings to love others as much as we love ourselves (**Matthew 22:39**) and to do unto others as I would like to be treated (**Matthew 7:12**). If I build my life upon the sand of the world's teachings, I know that I will not be able to weather the storms that will hit my life.

Rustler insisted that he go along as well. Jeremiah heard my story about how Rustler's snarling had scared off who knows how many varmints from our camp at night, so he was glad to have him come with us. You can never have enough eyes and ears working on the trail and around the campfires at night. Jeremiah took his scattergun along as well. I felt that we were going to be quite safe on this trip.

Jeremiah was able to make many connections with the Black people in the northern area of Texas. The Black population is considerable in number as some of the Buffalo Soldiers who served in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry of the U.S. Army decided to remain in the area of Fort Richardson after it was decommissioned. Many of the ex-soldiers continued to serve the state as surveyors and mapmakers. They also employed their expertise to make repairs on U.S. Army forts, string telegraph wire, as well as

guard wagon trains, stagecoaches, and trains on their routes. Many of the ex-soldiers had sent for their families, and they settled in Jacksboro. They were excited about the possibility of Jeremiah adding them to his preaching duties in Dublin.

In Jacksboro, Salt Creek, and Graham, Jeremiah was treated with respect by the Whites – at least in public. Jeremiah and I shared the preaching duties in the services. We were able to share in conducting baptisms, funerals, communions, and even weddings at all three communities in shared camp meetings with White, Black and Mexican participants. I love watching these cultures get together when possible as there is so much we can learn from one another.

At the Camp meetings, Jeremiah and I both spoke on the love of God and messages from Jesus about loving neighbors and enemies alike. We focused on the many topics that Jesus spoke on during His Sermon on the Mount – topics such as: *Blessed are the peacemakers, Don't be angry, Give to others in secret, Don't worship money, Love your enemies, Don't judge others, Don't worry about things, Turn your other cheek, How to properly pray to the Lord*, and many others (**Matthew, Chapters 5-7**). I love to hear Jeremiah preach. He speaks from his heart and his life experiences, and he truly reaches the hearts of his listeners. Sometimes when I hear a preacher speak, I feel that he is reading notes from some teacher. This can lead to a lack of feeling and connection with the listeners. I believe that one must connect with the emotions of the listeners to fully grab their attention, otherwise they drift away from the message and think about the challenges of their world. If they are not reached emotionally, they can walk away empty handed. I find it best to stay on target with a point or two and get to it quick. I always pray to the Holy Spirit to speak through me and tell people what He knows they need to hear to help them strengthen their Christian journeys.

Next, we rode into Breckenridge, and I introduced Jeremiah to the townspeople. They were glad to meet him. A place for us to sleep had been set up at the community building. We rode out to the Williams family homestead and ate supper with them. Rahab and Sadie were especially glad to see Josiah, the oldest son, because they knew he would give them treats and a rubdown. Esther, Jeremiah's horse, learned quickly to appreciate the tender-loving care that Josiah provided. The other children fawned over Rustler and begged Jeremiah to tell them some stories. We stayed up way past the children's bedtime listening to the stories Jeremiah had to tell and the songs he sang for them. They had not heard Black spiritual music and stories before, and they were all enthralled. Jeremiah promised to sing for them again at the camp meeting the next day.

The service at the community building was packed. Many people were excited about hearing from a new preacher. Again, we both preached on God's love and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Now, jeering and heckling are sometimes a problem for traveling preachers. Even the best preachers can be harassed by some people who are just evil or maybe a little bored. Sure enough, it was our turn to get harassed. Jeremiah and I



were jeered by some scallywags during the service. Four young men (not much younger than me) were making fun of Jesus' "Love your enemies" and "Turn the other Cheek" concepts from His Sermon on the Mount. They were hootin' and hollerin' and rolling in the aisles claiming that the Holy Spirit got a hold of them. The lay people assigned as ushers hurried them – and not gently - out of the room and apologized for their actions. Jeremiah and I let it go without comment. The congregation seemed to be embarrassed enough by the men's behavior without us adding to their shame. We continued the service with prayer and singing, and the giving of announcements and sharing of news from the state and the country. We finished the service with communion and a couple of professions of faith. It was a great night...so far.

In town later that evening, Jeremiah and I were headed to supper at the church. We were approached on the street and again ridiculed by the same four rowdies, "We don't like holier than thou preachers - especially Black preachers. We are going to show you how to love your enemies. Let's see you turn the other cheek now." The ruffians apparently expected to easily wail on two pacifist preachers. They were wrong. They were not carrying guns, but they each had a club or a chain. All four rushed us, and we responded. Jeremiah learned to fight as a slave forced into prize fighting. He learned to fight as someone who needed to win at all costs. These contests sometimes led to the death of one of the fighters. I was taught to fight as a law enforcement officer. I learned to defend myself and subdue criminals with minimal amount of injury. I took one of the rowdies down and pinned him. I looked up to see Jeremiah put the other three down with one brutal punch each. There were broken noses, black eyes, and lots of bruises, but no one was killed or badly harmed. The horrified townspeople who witnessed the altercation contacted the doctor to look at the men and reported the incident to the sheriff.

The community members of Breckenridge apologized profusely for the behavior of the young men, and they expressed an interest in Jeremiah joining the circuit. They talked of how much they loved Jeremiah's preaching, and how good it was to see a robust preacher who could take such good care of himself in a fight. I couldn't help but wonder what they thought of me as a bold fighting preacher. Perhaps it is best I don't press the issue. The thoughtful people loaded us up with food and other necessities for our trip and sent us on our way. It was late, so we pitched camp that night.

Early the next day as we were freshly mounted and hitting the trail for Comanche, we were again confronted by the same group of men who jeered us the night before. They had added a few dangerous looking men to their numbers. This time they were armed, and they got the drop on us. I was really upset with myself for not being more cautious. When will I learn that trouble rarely completely goes away? I should have expected this to happen. We were ordered off of our horses. The leader of the group said, "Get off those horses or we will shoot them out from under you!" He told us to leave our guns on the horses. Rustler got to growling, but I hushed him up so he wouldn't be shot. I was expecting another fist fight...but what happened next was much

worse. Four men surrounded each one of us and gave us a good beating. We gave a good accounting for ourselves, but we were soon overpowered by the numbers.

As we were lying on the ground all bruised and somewhat broken in a few places, I hoped the worst was over. It wasn't. The leader, whose name was Blake, told two of his men to bind Jeremiah up and loop a rope over one of the live oak tree limbs – a very sturdy one. They walked Jeremiah over to the tree; I didn't need to see or hear anything more. I knew it was us or them. I yelled to Rahab, "Get 'Em!" She immediately rushed the nearest horse, and all bedlam let loose. Sadie and Esther followed suit and moved toward the other horses and some of the men. The men were so taken by surprise that they either froze in place or scrambled to get away from them.

Rustler attacked the two men who were attempting to loop the noose over Jeremiah's neck. The screams coming from the men were horrifying. It looked as though one of their throats had been torn away, and Rustler was working hard on the other man's arm. As hurt as I was, I jumped toward Rahab and grabbed my colt revolver. I fired three shots in the direction of the men. I hit two men in their legs and hit Blake square in the chest with my fourth shot. I wasn't necessarily shooting to kill, but he was training his gun on me, so I shot quickly. His eyes got big at the realization that he was going to die at the hand of a preacher, and he fell flat on his face. I told the remaining three men who were still standing, "Freeze or die. I only have two bullets left, but that means two of you will die if you move."

I demanded that Jeremiah be cut loose, and I ordered the group to the ground on their bellies. Two of them were dead – Blake and the one with the shredded throat. Three were wounded, and the other three seemed to be scared out of their wits that Jeremiah was standing over them with his gun pointed at them...his hand shaking... for the longest time. I believe his instinct was to kill each one. I decided to defend him in his play whatever it was going to be. Nearly being strung up must have brought back some unbearable feelings.

I placed my hand on his shoulder and stood with him. He finally relaxed and handed the gun to me. I couldn't let go of Jeremiah for the longest time because I was so grieved about what had almost happened to him. To know Jeremiah is to love him. He is the gentlest, kindest, most faithful man I have ever met. He would do anything for anyone - friend or stranger, and he was almost murdered because of the color of his skin. I ordered the men to shut their mouths and to keep them shut. I truly was afraid that what they might say would rile me to the point of finishing the job that Rustler and I had started.

It was a lengthy process, but we bandaged the wounded and draped the dead over their saddles, and we took them all back to Breckenridge. The Sheriff of Stephens County looked into the incident and talked with the young men whom we returned to them. I was relieved to hear the men confess to everything they had done including their planning to kill Jeremiah and I both and the actions they took to do so. Fortunately, Jeremiah had no hand in this; only Rustler and I were on the hook for the killings that



took place. I was cleared of the killings based on self-defense. If Jeremiah had played a part in the killings, I am not sure he would have been cleared so quickly.

Back on the trail, we stayed quiet for the longest time. I broke the silence by expressing to Jeremiah my feelings on having killed a man, "I did not kill with hate in my heart, and it certainly wasn't premeditated murder. According to God, killing with premeditation and hate in the heart deserves a death sentence. On one hand, I feel terrible about ending what might have been a good future for Blake. On the other hand, I honestly believed it was him or us; and I had to kill him in an effort to save us both." I fell silent wondering if Jeremiah wanted to talk. He did not.

So, I continued thinking aloud, "I wonder what Jesus would say about dealing with some of these challenging cases we face in this day and time. On one hand, I believe Jesus would say we should love our neighbors and forgive them seventy times seven (**Matthew 18: 21-22**). On the other hand, Jesus tells us not to continue to give what is holy to people who show disdain for the gospel, *"Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces* (**Matthew 7:6**). Jesus is telling us that some people will never choose to walk in the light and should be left to reap the consequences of their decisions. I believe that Blake truly intended to murder us both with hate in his heart, so God will forgive me for killing him in self-defense. Jeremiah still remained quiet, so I left it alone for the time being. I knew that we would talk about it later.

Further down the trail, Jeremiah surprised me with a request to ride with me to Coleman the next time I wanted to pay them a visit. Although he liked the people in Dublin and the people he had just met on my circuit, he was interested in checking out the community of Coleman as a possible place to relocate his family. He might even want to explore starting a church there for the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). He must have been intrigued by the stories I told him about the people in Coleman. I told him that I was already thinking of visiting Coleman soon after we returned to Dublin, and I would be proud to introduce him to Angela, her family, and the entire community of Coleman. This just reinforced my desire to move there myself.

Back in Dublin, I waited to hear from the Methodist conference as to my recommendation for a new circuit to be created for Cow Town, Buffalo Gap, Coleman, Brownwood, Copperas Creek, and Turkey Creek. I also submitted a request a few months back that if the circuit was approved, I would like to be considered as the preacher for that new circuit. I really thought it would be an easy decision for my superiors because I don't believe any other preacher would be interested in riding for what would probably be the most dangerous circuit in Texas. I say dangerous because of the Apache Braves, the wild animals, the bandits, and the rough characters who travel up the cattle trail from South Texas to Cow Town... oh, and did I mention the numerous saloons, gambling houses, and bordellos that call Buffalo Gap and Cow Town home?

At the first of May, I heard the decision of the presiding elders and the Northwest Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church about my recommendation. It was accepted, and I was to travel my Dublin/Graham circuit for one last time in July with the newly assigned preacher and be ready to report to the new Brownwood/Buffalo Gap circuit in September. This was a speedy timeline, but we preachers are familiar with quick changes.

I suppose I should tell you a little about how circuit riders exist on so little pay. Circuit riders can get compensation up to \$50+ a month or \$450-500 per year if all works out well. This amount of compensation is greatly dependent upon what the communities can scrape together. Almost all of a preacher's compensation comes from the communities they serve. Often a salary established by the Methodist conference and the actual salary a preacher receives is quite different due to hardships that the communities on the edge of civilization can experience. Many months a circuit rider's compensation will come in the form of whatever the communities can afford along with room and board supplied during visits. As a result, many circuit riders, especially those with families, have to supplement their income through a second occupation or through a spouse who works to bring in money.

Circuit riders are okay with low compensation because they see the bigger picture that Jesus presented to those who wish to be spiritual leaders. Jesus said, *"If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me"* (Luke 9:23). Francis Asbury, who many consider as the "Father of Circuit Riders," selected men who understood that they must suffer if they are to minister to the poor. Asbury encouraged his circuit riders to avoid the finer things in life that our world worships. He also wanted his circuit riders to understand that the average circuit riding preacher usually lasts no longer than 12 years on the circuit. They often are forced to retire due to health reasons or even an early death brought on by the dangers of riding the circuit. We simply follow our calling from God no matter what dangers the world has to offer.

In June, I traveled the Dublin/Graham circuit for the last time accompanied by the new pastor, Rev. James Johnson. Rev. Johnson was 30+ years old and had been preaching for the Methodist Conference for 10 years. His last charge was a church in the Austin area. I asked him what prompted him to want this circuit. He said it was not his choice to move this far west. I left it at that. He definitely was not one of the "elite" preachers who gets the choice positions the conference has to offer. I hoped that he would be okay and be able to adjust to the lifestyle of a traveling preacher. Most of all, I hoped he would serve the people of this circuit well.

We traveled the circuit together, and I introduced him to all of the people along the circuit. We met with Mr. Lynch and his family on the trail to Jacksboro. He was delighted to meet the new preacher who would be serving the town he was laying out – the town of Mineral Wells. He supplied us with plenty of that interesting tasting mineral



water. The townspeople of Jacksboro and Graham were very receptive to the new preacher, and I could tell that Rev. Johnson was warming up to his new assignment.

About 10 miles south of Graham on our way to Breckenridge, we came upon the homestead of the Wilson family. This is one of my usual stops in the area, and I always enjoy visiting and ministering to Mr. and Mrs. Wilson and their two daughters. We looked around the house and saw no signs of violence or robbery. All of their possessions were still in the barn and in the home. Their horses and saddles were gone, so they must have made a short trip to a neighbor. There was no note left as to their whereabouts, so it all seemed to be quite a mystery. I was sad that I didn't get the chance to introduce Rev. Johnson to the Wilson family, but I supposed that he would get to meet them soon.

The people of Breckenridge and Comanche and the people all along the way were receptive to Rev. Johnson. They enjoyed his preaching style and welcomed him with open arms. Leaving people I have come to love dearly was difficult. Saying "farewell" has never been easy for me. There were lots of hugs and tears flowing at each stop. What kept me going was my faith in the Lord's plan. He obviously intended for me to take on this new assignment, and I dared hope that God would be placing Angela and me together for the rest of our lives.

I had plenty of time to acclimate Rev. Johnson to the new assignment, and I gave him lots of advice. One particularly important suggestion I gave him was to find a traveling partner who can help him learn to ride the trail. I was thinking that Willie would be a suitable candidate for that if he and Rev. Johnson took a liking to each other. I would approach Willie to help out. This would not only help Rev. Johnson, but I believed it would benefit Willie to befriend another preacher. The influence and spiritual guidance would be good for him. But who knows, Willie might follow me to Coleman. If he does, I would like that very much.

Back in Dublin, it was now early August, and it was hot, hot, hot. I turned my attention to paying a visit to Coleman to visit Angela. I had lots of news to share with her. But first, Jeremiah asked me to help him with something before he relocated his family to Coleman. He needed me to help find his brother, Isaiah, and his cousin Tobias – or "Izzy" and "Toby" as he called them. They were sold off by their previous owner just before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. The slave owner knew that this proclamation was coming, so he sold off many of his slaves to slave traders headed to Mexico. That was the last time he saw them. They were 20 years old at the time, which would make them 35 years old now if they were still alive. Jeremiah suspected they were taken to Laredo where they were sold as slaves to someone in Mexico. I love Jeremiah so deeply that I had only one choice...to help him as best I could. I said, "It seems to me that our Lord God considers them to be free men, so let's go do the Lord's work!"

We hitched up my two mules, Sadie and Buster, to a light wagon and headed to Laredo. We had to say goodbye to Rahab, Esther, and Rustler - our traveling buddies. This was not a road trip for them. It was a long trip, but we made it in good time. As we

entered Laredo, I noticed Mr. and Mrs. Wilson – of all people – sitting in a wagon. Their two daughters were with them. Mr. Wilson saw me and gave me the “help” sign in sign language. We stopped, and I got out and stepped up and sat next to the driver of the wagon. He growled at me and told me to “get lost...or else.” I stuck the barrel of my colt into his ribs and said, “Sure I will, but first you and I need to talk to the Sheriff.” We all went together to the sheriff’s office where the driver admitted to kidnapping the Wilson family to sell on the Mexican slave market. He was also glad to give us the name and location of the ranch in Mexico belonging to the slave traders. The Wilsons were grateful to us both, and they made arrangements to return to Graham.

I believed that God was leading us directly to Jeremiah’s brother and cousin, so we took our mules and wagon to the livery stable where we purchased four wild horses who were used to traveling the rough terrain to which we were headed. They would be able to travel fast, and they would be very well-acclimated to the harsh climate. We saddled them up and set out immediately for the ranch of the slave traders. The ranch was just 10 miles across the border, so it was an easy ride.

We arrived at the ranch, and we asked the owner the whereabouts of the two men. We were taken to the barn where the “indentured servants” lived, and Jeremiah immediately recognized his brother and cousin. They were somewhat emaciated, but they appeared healthy enough. It was quite a reunion, but time was of the essence. We needed to get those two away from the ranch as soon as possible. We offered \$200 to purchase the two, but our offer was turned down. I told the owner, “We consider these two men to be free as they were freed by the U.S. government. I believe that \$200 is a fair compensation for you to release these two free American citizens. So we are taking them...like it or not.” With that I placed the money on the table, and we mounted our ponies and rode north.

We rode those ponies hard as we knew we would be followed. Sure enough, we were immediately pursued. There was no way we were going to make it to the border before we were overrun, so we approached a small butte, jumped off the ponies, and climbed up the butte to make our stand. I certainly did not want to kill any of the pursuers, but it looked like a life-and-death fight was going to happen.

A dozen or so pursuers reigned up at the base of the butte and began to climb up and fire their rifles. Not wanting to kill anyone, we picked up some rather large rocks and began to throw them at the climbers. The rocks were not deterring the pursuers, so Jeremiah put his shoulder to a large boulder and pushed it off the edge. The pursuers scattered when they saw that boulder coming at them. Jeremiah said, “Throwing rocks won’t do it. We need to roll these boulders down the hill directly at them.” He looked at Izzy and said, “We’ve got to Roll ‘em, Son!” With that, we put our shoulders to large boulders and shoved them down the hill. It was not long before the pursuers mounted up and rode away. It was not worth their lives to fight these crazy men on the butte. To our surprise, our wild horses were waiting for us as we came down the butte.



Back in Laredo, we shared the story of the rescue with the sheriff. He was delighted to hear that we got the best of the slave traders. "Too bad you gave them \$200. They certainly didn't deserve that. Now that I know who they are, I will grab them next time they show their faces in town. I will recover your money and wire it to you, at once!" We thanked the sheriff and headed to the livery stable. We were anxious to hitch up our wagon and head back home with our rescued family and new horses. It was a deliriously happy time as we made the trip back home. Izzy, Toby, and Jeremiah had many stories to tell. I just wanted to get home so I could see Angela!

It is now nearly September, and I am required by the conference to move to Coleman and get my new circuit planned and started. As soon as we got back to Dublin and celebrated properly with Jeremiah's family, I knew it was time to ride to Coleman and visit Angela. I had news to share with her about my new circuit. More importantly, I decided I would get on my knees and ask her to marry me. If she says yes, we could be married as soon as the spring of '79.

Yes, I have our lives all planned out. My new circuit would work out fine. Angela would continue to study to be a medical doctor, and she might be willing to accompany me on my circuit occasionally to see to people's medical needs. We would begin our family and have lots of children. Jeremiah and his family would follow us to Coleman. Paul, my Indian friend, would move to Coleman with his family and become best friends with our families. I would one day settle in as a pastor for only one church.

Perhaps I should slow down and share these thoughts with Angela.

She may have a different perspective on our future.

...and I should definitely check in with God to see what He has planned for me.

Matt Stephen

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