

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
2 February 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“When Going Over the Edge IS The Way”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*

Touchstone words in Epiphany: *REFLECT* and *RESPOND*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Luke 4:21-30

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

I’m speaking of course about
At the National Prayer service
on January 21, the Rt. Rev.
Mariann Edgar Budde, who has
served as Bishop of Washington
in the Episcopal Church since
2011, preached a sermon on
unity and mercy, concluding
with these words:

*“... In the name of our God, I
ask you to have mercy upon the
people in our country who are
scared now. There are
transgender children in both
Republican and Democratic
families who fear for their lives.*

*And the people who pick our
crops and clean our office
buildings; who labor in our
poultry farms and meat-packing
plants; who wash the dishes
after we eat in restaurants and
work the night shift in hospitals
— they may not be citizens or
have the proper documentation,
but the vast majority of*

*immigrants are not criminals.
They pay taxes, and are good
neighbors. They are faithful
members of our churches,
mosques and synagogues,
gurdwara, and temples.*

*Have mercy, Mr. President, on
those in our communities whose
children fear that their parents
will be taken away. Help those
who are fleeing war zones and
persecution in their own lands
to find compassion and welcome
here. Our God teaches us that
we are to be merciful to the
stranger, for we were once
strangers in this land.*

*May God grant us all the
strength and courage to honor
the dignity of every human
being, speak the truth in love,
and walk humbly with one
another and our God, for the
good of all the people of this
nation and the world.”¹*

¹ Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, “Have mercy, Mr. President”: Here is the sermon that enraged Donald

Trump,” *NorthJersey.com* (29 Jan. 2025), accessed on Feb. 2, 2025 at

The bishop's gracious, mercy-filled invitation was met with hate and mockery from President Trump and many MAGA supporters. They say her sermon was nasty, extreme, heretical, anti-biblical, shameful, uninspired...to name a few descriptors. She got death threats.

You know who else got death threats for a sermon he preached on welcoming the foreigner and those who folks in power deemed as "outsiders"?

Jesus.

It's a reminder that our tribal, insular nature was visible in the very first moments of Jesus' ministry,² and that naming this and guarding against our exclusionary, self-protective tendencies is as important for us today as it was in Jesus' day.

It's also a reminder that speaking words of grace and mercy can get you killed. Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart.³

But it's not like Jesus' first sermon should be a surprise to folks. This is who Jesus IS and

who he has been from the beginning.

In Luke 2, in Bethlehem of Palestine—Jesus is born. His first beginning is the beginning of his flesh and blood human life. As an infant, he takes his first breaths, inhaling the scent of manure from the temporary shelter his teenage mother and working class carpenter father were able to find last minute as they followed government orders to flee where they lived (Nazareth) to go to Joseph's family's hometown (Bethlehem) so that they could be counted for a census in order to pay taxes that, as Jews, would ultimately support their own oppression as those taxes supported the oppressing empire, Rome. Shortly, thereafter this young family would become refugees, fleeing the threat of violence from a tyrant king Herod, crossing borders to Egypt—an act that ultimately would safely protect Jesus from being the victim of the genocide that would kill all the other little children two years old and younger in Bethlehem of Palestine.

<https://www.northjersey.com/story/opinion/2025/01/29/rump-bishop-budde-sermon-transcript/78002821007/>.

² As quoted from Erick Folkerth's Facebook post referenced in "Have Mercy," sermon by Rev. Milton

Brasher-Cunningham (Jan. 27, 2025) posted on *don't eat alone* (<https://donteatalone.com/community/have-mercy>).

³ Folkerth, *ibid*.

Jesus' first beginning—the beginning of his life—was unconventional and unstable. Just imagining it in modern day terms brings up the most tragic, violent images of our day—a brown baby boy, born in Palestine, to Jewish parents, unwed, and fleeing as refugees to avoid genocide.

From the beginning of Jesus' life—we see that to be born into unstable, vulnerable circumstances does not mean that one is not loved by their parents or by God, but, in fact, his very life reveals to us that God's image and essence is embodied and enfleshed in the most vulnerable people in the most vulnerable situations. Jesus was not born in Rome. Jesus was not born into the Herodian family line. Jesus was not born into wealth or with white skin. Jesus was not born and raised in one place. Jesus was born into loving, human, messy, complexity.

Then at the end of Luke chapter 2 and into Luke chapter 3, we see Jesus' spiritual beginning. The beginning of his personal faith journey. He's in the Temple, curious and questioning as a 12 year old. The he's baptized by his cousin John, who—as he baptizes—spouts

words of repentance, or re-orientation such as: *“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none...and do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations,”* (Luke 3:11, 14).

And of course, as he comes up out of the baptism waters the voice from heave says: *“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”* Jesus is blessed exactly for who he is in all his identities. Which he'll need for his 40 days in the wilderness as he experiences tests to his physical stamina and strength, and temptations to fall prey to the lure of property, protection, power, and privilege. The devil essentially tempts Jesus with everything he did not have as a child growing up—and yet Jesus refuses and resists. He refuses and resists because he knows that God does not reside in power, privilege, property, or physical strength. The Spirit of God resides in the most humble, vulnerable of places—ordinary people. The flesh and blood of our humanity. God resides within, not “without.” Power and pride lead us away from the heart of God, humility and hospitality lead us into the heart of God.

And so then, by the time we get to Jesus' third beginning in Luke, the beginning of his public ministry, we ought to know what to expect. We should not be surprised by his inaugural message!

Jesus goes to his hometown—Nazareth. He begins his public ministry in the place where he grew up—the place where people know him and his family and his story and circumstances and his scandalous birth and miraculous escape of Herod's death warrant. I mean gossip travels far and fast in small towns so these hometown folks would have definitely knows the scoop of his life, including all the gritty details. So knowing what they know about him, Jesus sits down and opens the scroll to the text that will define his ministry. Isaiah 61. Make no mistake. Jesus did not just flip to a random page and read. He unrolled the scroll to the words that would define his ministry. The words that represented his purpose on earth and the very heart of God within him that he embodied. Jesus inaugurates his public ministry a few spiritual executive orders, if you will:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed and sent me to:

- 1) *Bring good news to the poor*
- 2) *Proclaim release to the captives*
- 3) *Recovery of sight to the blind*
- 4) *Set free those who are oppressed*
- 5) *Proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (the jubilee...which is, the forgiveness of all financial debt) (Luke 4:18-19)*

Then he sits down and gives a one sentence sermon on the text: *"Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,"* (Luke 4:21).

In other words, these words of Isaiah are fulfilled through me, AND Jesus is implying—through each of you. Isaiah is no longer just a scroll we read; Isaiah is a set of orders we enact.

And the crowd...they go wild! Cheers. High fives. Shouts and slaps on the back. Yes! Here's our Hometown hero Jesus...and he is all about us. Jesus might as well have been wearing a red cape and tights, because these folks in Nazareth thought he was gonna solve all their problems as their superman...finally put them *first*.

They are amazed. They love what he is saying. And they love what he is saying because they

believe it is a message for them. They believe in *their* Messiah, their Anointed One. That he'll prioritize their needs and favor them and give them special privileges because he's known them forever and because he shares their faith tradition. But they are sorely mistaken. If they've known Jesus forever, if they know him to be Joseph's son—and more the point *Mary's* son, the one who sang of her child in her womb:

*He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1:46-55)*

...If they know who Jesus is and *whose* he is, they should know that he cares about those on the 'outside' the most, those who need community and belonging, those who are marginalized and oppressed, those who are captive, poor, and hurting. And quite frankly, that is *not them*.

They are insiders at this point, not outsiders.

And Jesus can tell that they aren't fully getting it so to his one sentence sermon he adds two illustrations, also deliberately chosen.

Elijah and Elisha, also prophets, reached beyond the people of Israel (the people in their own hometown, so to speak) to welcome those who were representative of the most marginalized "Gentiles."

Elijah went to the unnamed poor widow at Zarephath in Sidon, and Elisha healed the Syrian leper known as Naaman. Both were from countries outside of Israel. Both vulnerable. One for being a widow and famished in the famine, literally living on the pennies of her last paycheck, and one for a disease that ostracized him from the community socially. And Naaman was the leader of an enemy military, to top it off!

Just the mention of these folks "on the outside" receiving compassion and attention from the prophets causes rage.

Jesus began his ministry saying the Good News is for Gentile as well as Jew, widow as well as

wealthy, enemy as well as ally. The Good News knows no boundaries and abides by no borders. It includes them, but it also includes others. But the crowd did not want to hear it. They just didn't.

They did not want to hear Jesus talking about welcoming outsiders and they really did not want him telling them to do the same.

So the crowd, in their anger, drove Jesus to the edge of the cliff and were about to hurl him off. But the story does not end here. This is not Jesus' end, but yet another beginning. Because what they did not know is that Jesus thrives on the edge. He was born there, after all. And on the edge of that cliff Jesus sees all those whom those in power have tried have throw off who they are trying to hurl away even now, and Jesus is not phased. He goes on his way. The Way.

You may know the earliest followers of Jesus were called followers of The Way, because what Jesus offers us, literally, is a new Way of living. He even said, "*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life...*" (John 14:6) Jesus leads us to A Way of Life that is rooted in love, inclusion,

mercy, and grace. A Way of Life that begins on the Edge so that all are included already.

When you start at the center, it's a whole lot more work to find ways to include all those outside of the center. But when you start on the edge, the margins, the periphery, and ensure those folks' needs are met, then by default, everyone else in the center will have their needs met too. We have a one directional gospel. It doesn't work both ways. The Gospel has never been and will never be a Way that begins with those in the Center and works its way out to include others. The Gospel begins on the edges, on the margins, and therefore has no other way except to include all.

And today, like Jesus' hometown crowd, many far-right Christians in our country have co-opted Christ for a message that I believe he would not claim or endorse or even recognize. The last two weeks have brought executive order after executive order from a small, yet powerful group of people in the center (the Oval Office), that are just dragging Jesus to the edge of the cliff and threatening to push him over. For all the people that they are pushing over the edge, we are

told in scripture, are the face of Jesus himself.

Of course, these folks in power would never say this. They would say they are the Christians and are doing this in the name of Christ, but do they not know Jesus of Nazareth? The Jesus who began his life here on earth born into the margins, the Jesus whose spiritual awakening kept him on the margins even as he was tempted with power and wealth and property (that he did not choose but refused), the Jesus whose public ministry began and ended with a cry for the oppressed to be free, the poor to be fed, the foreigner to be welcomed, the widow and orphan to be cared for, and yes, even, the oppressor to be forgiven: *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do?”* (Luke 22:34)

Grace and mercy and love are laced through Jesus’ life and ministry—beginning to end. And so is radical welcome of the “other,” the “outsider.”

Today, there is no following Jesus on The Way without standing on the edge of the cliff with him...the edge of the cliff where so many and so much has been cast over by those in

power—legal or not, constitutional or not. So much and so many are being dangled over the edge, threatening to be cast over:

On the edge: our democracy, as checks and balances fade away.

On the edge: immigrants and migrants, so, so many individuals and families—and even those born in our country with birth right citizenship—and all those entities that work to protect and uplift immigrant families: schools, churches, non-profits.

On the edge: transgender persons—the acknowledgment of their existence, the need for their rights, the celebration of their gifts—even those who want to risk their lives in service for our country!

On the edge: all of our partnerships and trade agreements, even with our closest neighbors Mexico and Canada.

On the edge: all refugees fleeing violent countries and devastating circumstances

On the edge: those incarcerated on death row, for whom the death penalty may be reinstated

On the edge: the World Health Organization, vaccines, cancer research, scientists and physicians.

On the edge: climate scientists, climate educators, the Paris Climate accord, environmental justice workers and agencies.

On the edge: sacred lands, bodies of water, fragile ecosystems.

On the edge: black people, brown people, Latino and Hispanic people, Asian people, indigenous people, LGBTQIA+ people, disabled people...all those who benefit from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and all those who work in this field.

On the edge: voter registration efforts, equitable electoral maps, civil rights.

On the edge: federal workers

On the edge: all organizations and non-profits and efforts funded by federal grant monies—which is way more than we realize...think of your favorite non-profits around housing, hunger, inclusion, education, mental health, disaster relief, and more.

On the edge: police officers and their families and congress women and men who were harmed physically and psychologically by January 6th insurrectionists—folks now pardoned and free to buy firearms and organize against our democracy yet again.

On the edge: school boards working to prevent school shootings, teachers teaching accurate history.

On the edge: people suffering from genocide and war, displacement and disaster, including Gaza and Ukraine.

On the edge: women's bodies, women's rights, women's healthcare.

On the edge: all those who will be imprisoned in Guantanamo.

On the edge: anything that threatens the power of profits or Big Tech.

On the edge: the average everyday people who are working hard to help ourselves and help others—that is...you and me.

On the edge: all people of faith or people of no faith who do not espouse Christian Nationalism.

So here we are—so many of us, on the edge—alongside so much and so many who are vulnerable, threatened, afraid, marginalized, oppressed.

Here we are on the edge...some already cast off the cliff, some being dangled in midair, some just arriving at the crest fearing their fate, some back in town huddled for fear that they will be dragged out next.

Here we are on the edge...pushed to the brink by the anger and hate of the mob of “inside power,” just because of the circumstances of our poverty or our place of birth or our profession or our personal identity or gender or orientation or race or disability.

Here we are on the edge of the cliff of all that we have known, the cliff that claims to hold power and control over us, the cliff controlled by all those who say they care in the name of Christ but do not see clearly the Christ they claim.

Here we are on the edge...and...it’s the only place

we can be, whether we want to be here or not. Because this is where Jesus is. **We are on the edge with Jesus.** Jesus is always on the edge, on the margins, on the periphery. Jesus is on the outside of power and privilege because that’s where the Spirit of God dwells. That’s where love begins. In the hearts and lives of those most vulnerable and most in need. Wherever there is an edge...that is where Jesus is. In fact, if he wasn’t pushed there by this crowd, he would have gone there anyway on his own I think.

Jesus does not fear the edge.

Luke writes that as the angry crowd drove him to the edge of the cliff, Jesus “*passed on through the midst of them and went on his way,*” (Luke 4:30).

When I was initially reflecting on this text earlier in the week I was visualizing Jesus’ response as him turning around and walking away from the edge of the cliff. But the text doesn’t say that. We know he eventually makes his way out of Nazareth and into Capernaum, but we don’t actually know his route. All we know is that he passed through the crowd, out of their grip, and went on this way.

This reflection led me to visualize a different response from Jesus, which, of course, means a different response from us, as well.

When Jesus passes through the midst of this angry, self-focused crowd and goes on his way, what if his way is NOT away from the edge they are trying to hurl him over, but directly toward that edge...and even...all the way over it?

Because it seems to me that Jesus is always walking in whatever Way leads him toward those who, like him, are brought to the edge of the cliff by those in power (by those who do not understand that are all included, all are beloved, by those who want to exclude and discard instead of welcome and embrace). Jesus would never leave all those he sees being pushed to the edge just to be thrown over the cliff by unchecked power.

So, then, what if the choice is NOT about either being on the edge of the cliff with the mob OR walking in the way of Jesus away from that edge on a different way...**what if the Way of Jesus is Going All the**

Way Going All Over the Edge itself?

What if Going over the Edge is the Way of Jesus?

We have no choice in times like these but to pass through the midst of those who are trying to push so many people over the edge, and to not leave them there alone, but to go over the edge with them...to scale down the side of the cliff with Jesus so that we are there to catch all these vulnerable folks when they are pushed by those in power...creating the biggest net of compassion, mercy, and grace possible to catch all those who are falling?

Jesus leaves no one on the edge. Jesus, as we see in the examples from his sermon today, does not see boundaries or borders as edges of inclusion or exclusion, so why would he see the edge of a cliff as a barrier either?

And look, I'm not saying that going over the edge of the cliff is going to be easy; it's scary and disorienting and worrying. It's gonna require tactics and strategy and subversive teamwork and a whole lot of Jesus and hail Mary's...but what other choice do we have? **The way of Jesus always leads**

towards those who are most vulnerable and most in need, and sometimes there's not a more gentle, comfortable path to get to the folks who need us most...sometimes it's just a hard journey, a treacherous climb, a dicey descent. Sometimes, oftentimes, the Way of Jesus will require way more courage and risk than it does "so called commonsense" or comfort.

There is no room left in a Jesus-centered faith for the illusion that it will be easy or comfortable. We have a hard descent climb ahead friends; the cliff is steep; the drop to steady ground is daunting.

But there is one who is holding our ropes; the belayer at the bottom is God. God is tightening us in the grip of grace, helping us find our footing as we go over the edge. Together. We, who follow Jesus—*Emmanuel*, God with us, the one who embodies vulnerability and oppression and experienced those things in great measure himself—we have no choice but to go all the way over the edge with Jesus...following his Way...to all those who need him most.

We will get to Capernaum, and to safer ground for other healings and teachings, and we'll have a chance to connect again with those who threw so many over, they too will need mercy and grace, but for now, there are people on the edge who need us. And *Jesus' whole identity and message* is on the edge right now and he needs us too. He needs us to remind the world that his message is one of Love. Grace. Mercy. Inclusion.

Those in power, those from the 'hometown' of their wealth or whiteness or privilege, those in the small circle in the center, they want us to think that they are the ones who hold our fate in their hands. **They dangle us in fear, but Jesus leads us in faith...over the edge.**

And the mob will be loud. The hate will be spewing. But like Jesus, may we not get caught up in all the words, all the actions, all the chaos, all the distractions—may we stay focused and centered in our calling as ones who follow the Jesus that Luke portrays in the gospels...a Jesus that empathizes with and identifies with those most marginalized and most in need.

Jesus never seeks to protect wealth or profits or borders or righteousness or status or military. Jesus seeks out the lost, the least, the brokenhearted, the sick, the dying, the vulnerable, the ones in need of forgiveness, the ones in need of belonging.

As the Rev. Matthew Ichihashi Potts, the Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church in Harvard Yard preached last week:

“We have all seen this week the condemnation and demonization of migrants, of gender non-conforming people, of trans people, the condemnation and demonization of anyone outside this narrow, constrained, and cruel vision of blessedness. All these outsiders, they are the ones Jesus is asking us to be loyal to and to serve. Not him, *them*. Jesus is not asking us if we are on his side, he's telling us we'd better be on *theirs*...Despite what you may have heard about our Christian faith, I don't believe the work of Christianity is merely about naming Jesus as Lord. That is so easy to do. Anybody could do it. Look around, just about anybody does do it...Christian

discipleship is not about claiming Jesus so we can condemn others. It's about loving God's children, all of them, outsiders and strangers, most of all.”⁴ It's about following Jesus on his way...wherever it leads.

Calvary, may we follow Jesus on his Way...even as it leads us all over the edge...for over this edge we must trust we will find in the arms of one another—*Emmanuel*, God with us.

Amen.

⁴ Rev. Matthew Ichihashi Potts, Ph.D., “First Sunday of the Spring Term,” *The Memorial Church in Harvard Yard* (26 Jan. 2025), sermon accessed on Feb. 2, 2025 at

<https://memorialchurch.harvard.edu/blog/first-sunday-spring-term>.