

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: SNAPSHOTS OF A SAVIOR**

#### **Refusing Safety**

(Selected passages from the Gospels)

Study #2

#### **Introduction: Playing it safe...**

For most of us, there are certain life arenas where we are willing to take risks and certain arenas where we are more likely to play it safe.

I don't mind taking a flight on an airplane. But unlike some of my more adrenaline-junkie friends, I don't ever see myself skydiving. I like to go camping in the backcountry, but I don't make it any easier on the bears than I have to so I don't sleep with food in my tent.

With risk-taking and playing it safe in mind, I'll reference my recently completed February trip to Kenya.

I was there for a pastors' conference not far from Nairobi. The church leaders to whom I was speaking know more about dangerous living than I do and, generally speaking, take more risks on a daily basis than I do.

At the conference, I used my speaking time with the pastors to walk through the life of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark. During one of our sessions we came to the section in Mark that recorded the life and death of John the Baptist.

Now, I've always admired John, but in recent years he has become one of my favorite Bible characters and a personal hero.

He was wild and untamed. He was all courage and boldness, all about God and holiness. We find John's story in bits and pieces in all four of the Gospels, and I've come to better appreciate him through Gene Edwards' wonderful book, The Prisoner in the Third Cell.<sup>1</sup>

The story of John's death is ugly. He had called out King Herod for unlawfully taking his own close relative, Herodias, from her husband and then marrying her. John's bold rebuke infuriated both Herod and Herodias, which led to his imprisonment and then to his death by beheading.

We'd all agree that the story of John's death contrasts the best of humanity's courage and integrity with the worst of humanity's cowardice and cruelty.

Now, the pastors and church leaders to whom I was speaking in Kenya (in the city of Riuru) were great folks.

But after I told the story of John's death, one of the pastors expressed his opinion that perhaps John should not have so boldly denounced Herod and Herodias for their illicit relationship.

This pastor suggested that if John had simply (and prudently) remained silent about the matter, he might have prolonged his ministry and been effective for God for a longer period of time.

I listened to this, knowing that the man who was speaking to me was probably much more likely to face opposition for speaking up for Jesus in his culture than I am in my own, and being fairly confident that this man was quite likely a courageous man of faith.

I didn't berate him or his opinion for being cowardly.

I simply said that John was "mission minded" and didn't think "strategically" when it came to deciding whether to speak out about a moral issue. He called a spade a spade, fulfilled his prophetic ministry, and was willing to let the consequences fall where they would.

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<sup>1</sup> God used Edwards' book about King David, A Tale of Three Kings, to fundamentally change my life a number of years ago. I highly recommend both very short and readable books.

Sometimes, I conceded, playing it safe is smart. But when you are caught in the current of a passion greater than your fear, you throw caution to the wind and refuse safety.

John the Baptist refused to play it safe.

Well, John wasn't the only one who didn't play it safe. Jesus didn't play it safe, either, and this morning, for the second Sunday in a row we're going to look at a few snapshots of Jesus from the Gospels.

Last week we noticed that He was a wonderful Counselor.

Today we'll see that His commitment to be "on mission" for what His Father sent Him to do was the driving force of His life.

Today we'll briefly touch on a few watershed moments when Jesus refused to act for His own safety's sake - and we'll see that those courageous, mission-minded watershed moments made all the difference for you and me.

### *Reading the life of Jesus*

It can be tempting for us to read the Gospels as a simple - or even as a random - recounting of things that Jesus said and did.

At first glance it could look as if Matthew and Mark and Luke and John are nothing more than the record of a few events from Jesus' life.

We could read them as if, taken together, the four Gospels give us a picture of His words and His works, kind of like when you listen to four eyewitnesses of a car wreck you'll finally get a good idea of what really happened.

That would be a tragic misreading of the Gospels, because each of the four Gospels is more than that. They were each written for a purpose, as all good literature is given for a purpose.

They each show not only action, but movement; and not only movement, but direction.

Jesus was going somewhere, and getting to that somewhere would not happen by playing it safe. Beginning to end, He exercised the virtue of moral courage and refused the safe and secure path.

So, we trace Jesus' life and find a bunch of moments when He made decisions to take a certain direction from which there could be no turning back.

We know that Jesus lived a childhood, an adolescence, and a young adulthood. But these seasons are cloaked in obscurity, as Scripture gives us few details. The Bible only zeroes in on the last three years of His life which are the years of His active ministry.

These years are launched when He showed up one day at the Jordan River to be baptized by John, that baptism being one of the few events in Jesus' life recorded by all four Gospels.<sup>2</sup>

After Jesus' baptism He was "*led*" by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 4; "*impelled*" - Mark 4) into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days and then successfully resisted all the temptations the devil threw at Him.

Following the baptism and time in the wilderness, we come to one of those watershed moments that set a direction for the rest of His life, an event where He didn't play it safe.

Luke gives us the fullest accounting, telling us that Jesus had launched a whistle-stop tour of the villages of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues in the north of Israel.

### **The Home Crowd (Luke 4:16ff)**

#### **Jesus Homecoming Message (vv. 18-21)**

All was going well until He decided to go back to Nazareth, his hometown.

Going through villages like Gennesaret and Magdala, Bethsaida and Chorazin and Cana where He wasn't known was relatively safe. Going to Nazareth wasn't safe.

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<sup>2</sup> John doesn't actually record the event, but mentions it. (John 1:29-34)

He had matured in Nazareth. Everyone knew Him there. I've always figured that the people there would have known Him as an unassuming young man. He was respectful and respectable. It was a friendly crowd.

Jesus going back to Nazareth to preach as God's Ambassador is like you going back to your high school reunion (something I've sadly never done) where you were well-known for living "under the radar" (which I was) to announce your candidacy for President of the United States.

But there in Nazareth, on a Sabbath day, with everyone gathered for worship, the thirty year old Jesus walked into the synagogue, walked to the front, picked up the scroll and read from Isaiah:

***[Luke 4:18] "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, [19] TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."***

Then Luke tells us that Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down.

All eyes are fixed on Jesus Heads nod. People are impressed. "He's got a good voice for speaking. Seems confident, poised. Mary must be proud."

But we can almost read the thoughts of the people. "What an interesting passage for Jesus choose for today's reading. A text that highlights the ministry of the Messiah, the Savior. I wonder why Mary's boy, would read that passage?"

And then we read Jesus' words to the group that had gathered. After sitting down, He sat out loud, [21] "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

### **Some Home-Town Crowd Head Scratching (v. 22)**

With those words the mood, the atmosphere in the room shifted from back-slapping the fine, upstanding hometown Boy to wondering if maybe He's gotten too big for His britches.

Muttering under their breaths to each other, we hear, [22] "Is this not Joseph's son?"

And that was the moment when Jesus jumped off the cliff of safety.

Speaking to His family and to His former neighbors and to men and women who would have watched Him grow up and to peers who grew up with Him, He accused them of faithlessness.

### **Immediate, Deep, and Bitter Conflict (vv. 23-28)**

He said that they were treating Him the way God's people had treated the great prophet Elijah hundreds of years earlier. He scolded them for not believing that He was the Messiah spoken of in the Isaiah scroll He had just read.<sup>3</sup>

This was, as far as we know, the first time Jesus made a claim to be the Messiah and He did so in the most familiar - and therefore the most dangerous - of surroundings. He announced at home.

Quick as a flash, safety disappeared and the danger became real and intense.

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<sup>3</sup> [23] And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" [24] And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. [25] "But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; [26] and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. [27] "And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

*[28] And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; [29] and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. [30] But passing through their midst, He went His way.*

Jesus' jump off of a metaphorical cliff of safety almost led to His being hurled off of a very literal cliff.

Get this: Longing for His hometown friends to hear the Good News, He went to Nazareth to proclaim the Gospel. Familiarity bred deep contempt and He was rejected.

And then, rather than back down, apologize, take His words back, Jesus got right in their faces and risked everything to call them to faith.

Talk about not playing it safe! He risked His life, His reputation, and lifelong friendships to push God's purposes forward - and that was just the beginning. His life was a series of chosen risks and of refusals to play it safe.

We watch His continuing risk-taking ways as we watch Him choose and train His followers.

Fast forward a few months past that Sabbath in Nazareth. Jesus has been healing and preaching and casting out demons and performing miracles.

Everywhere He goes He is followed by crowds who love the excitement of following. Jesus is also followed by a few dozen hangers-on who are genuinely attracted to Him and His message.

Soon, it became time to single out a few from that smaller group to whom he would devote more time. He needed to separate out a group of followers He would train. We are given a listing of the twelve apostles in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Here is how Luke tells it.

## Apostles of the Ordinary

### The Twelve He Chose (Luke 6:12-16)

*[12] It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God. [13] And when day came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles. [14] Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James and John; and Philip and Bartholomew; [15] and Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot; [16] Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.*

Choosing those twelve men was not a safe play.

Jesus has been claiming to be the Messiah, the Savior, and He is collecting ambassadors for God's kingdom.

These twelve He has chosen will represent His interests. They will be the ones on whose shoulders responsibility for the mission will fall if something happens to Jesus - and He knows full well that something will happen to Him.

So a safe play would have been to travel to Jerusalem, go to the top rabbinic schools there, locate the most promising students of the Torah, and invite twelve of them to be apostles.

Jesus didn't do that. He chose men who were nothing special. In fact, what is so special about them is their extreme ordinariness.

They were fishermen and tax collectors and political zealots. With the exception of Judas Iscariot, they were all from Galilee, the backward, awkward region of first century Israel.

A quick rundown of the legacy of the twelve from the Gospels shows us that they doubted, denied, and betrayed. They were prejudiced and selfish.

OK. That might have been a bit harsh.

It's easy to engage in disciple-bashing and we actually want to stay away from either elevating these men to the status of superheroes OR casting aspersions on them as being total losers.

The reality is that there simply was nothing all that special about them. Jesus took enormous risk in choosing the average guys He chose.

Now, there was a reason for choosing ordinary. He did it so that when they succeeded (and they did), God would get the credit (and He did).

And He refused safe picks so that He could continue to invite average, ordinary people like me and you to follow (and He still does) who would continue to make Kingdom of God-sized difference in the world (and, by His grace, we do!).

Jesus' choice of the twelve apostles wasn't safe. He also refused safety in the way He trained them.

### **The Twelve He Sent (Luke 9: 1-5, 10-11)**

***[1] And He called the twelve together, and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases. [2] and He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing.***

A few short months after setting the twelve apart, Jesus sent them out on a ministry tour. They were to preach, heal, and cast out demons.

To which we want to say, "Whoa, Jesus! Are You sure these guys are ready?"

To which He would have said, "Ready? Who among you is ever ready for Kingdom of God-sized service? Of course they're not ready. Yes, they might fail - but failure is a great teacher. And if they succeed, it will be because they are learning to trust God."

Jesus threw caution to the wind when it came to entrusting the mission to the men He chose. He didn't play it safe here, either.

And then there was the time when He flunked the course in "How to Grow a Messiah Movement" in one easy lesson.

### **Church Growth in Reverse (John 6)**

Everybody knows that when you're trying to grow a movement you lower the bar. You become more inclusive. You expand the tent. The common wisdom in politics these days is that you should aim your message at the middle for maximum capture.

Evidently, Jesus never got that memo.

One day He fed way more than five thousand people by miraculously multiplying a few loaves of bread and small fish.

The crowds of people who were fed immediately identified Jesus as the Messiah (actually, they called Him "***the Prophet who is to come into the world.***" (6:14) and approached Him to make Him king of Israel.

Well, Jesus knew that it wasn't time to be crowned king, so He backed away from them and their demand.

But the crowds persisted in trying to crown Jesus king, so He accused them of not really being interested in His life-giving message, but in filling their bellies.

Still they wouldn't back off. And when they continued in their attempts to make Him king, He resorted to *raising* the bar, becoming *exclusive*, and *shrinking* the tent.

Right after giving them bread to eat, Jesus described Himself as the "Bread of Life." He told them that they would have to do with Him what they had just done with bread.

***[6:53] So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves."...***

The crowds muttered among themselves, thinking that Jesus was just being gross, and at the end of the day, John tells us, ***[66] As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.***

Of course He didn't mean it literally - "*eating*" and "*drinking*" here are metaphors for faith - but the idea was so disgusting that on that day the number of Jesus' followers dropped from thousands to exactly twelve.

Bringing that message in that way on that day was not a safe play! And Jesus made lots of other risky moves.

- He spoke to authority figures in a very non-safe, bold, risky way - and we'll watch Him as He speaks to power next Sunday.
- There were times when He would be healing and casting out demons in a certain village - and then He would just up and leave, no doubt leaving some sick, demon-possessed people unhelped. That must have created hard feelings on the part of some, and risked great loss of popularity.
- Then, on one particular Sunday He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt. That wasn't at all safe because it was a sure claim to be a king. The Lord knew that the Romans would surely crush a popular uprising against them and that the Jewish leadership was committed to maintaining the *status quo* with themselves in control.<sup>4</sup>

Over and over again Jesus refused safety. And there was one more thing He did that was shouts His blatant disregard to personal safety.

Shortly after the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus went to Jerusalem at the Passover season and made His way to the temple to worship.

When He arrived in the outer temple court (The Court of the Gentiles), what He saw made His blood boil.

#### **IV. House-Cleaning (John 2; Matthew 21)**

##### **Early**

*[John 2:13] The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. [14] And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.*

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<sup>4</sup> This act was like waving a red flag in front of a bull, proclaiming Himself the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, daring the leadership to accept Him.

Upon entering the Temple precincts, specifically the section of the Temple reserved for worship by God-fearing Gentiles, Jesus found animals being sold and money exchanged in what had become known as "The Bazaars of Annas."<sup>5</sup> The Temple of God had turned into a flea market.<sup>6</sup>

There were at least two major problems with this scene.

First, with the buying and selling taking place where it was (The Court of the Gentiles), a God-fearing non-Jew who came to Jerusalem to worship the one true God would have found no place to worship in the temple.

Second, there is ample evidence from literature from this period that the prices charged to the worshipper were exorbitant.

It's about the same thing as what happens when you go to the AT&T Center to watch a Spurs game. You are a "captive audience" so you pay \$8 for a medium Coke. The same sort of thing was going on in God's temple.

All of this was taking place in the temple, and the Jerusalem temple was to have been the spiritual focal point of the nation, reminding the Jews of God and uniting them in worship. With the shenanigans going on in Jesus' day worship was impossible.

So, on this day, Jesus walked through the Temple flea market, moving from table to table, taking it all in.

Righteous anger welled up inside Him for the **fact** of the merchandising and for the **place** of the merchandising.

And Jesus knew exactly what to do.

*[15] And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables;*

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<sup>5</sup> Annas was the main power broker on the religious scene at this time.

<sup>6</sup> In earlier times, the buying and selling and exchanging of currency took place across the Kidron Valley on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. For convenience sake, though, by Jesus' day, the merchandising had moved to the Temple itself.

***[16] and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." [17] His disciples remembered that it was written, "ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME."***

He fashioned a whip out of material that was present there in the area - probably cords used to tie up the animals. And then, the Bible tells us that He drove them all out of the Temple. He drove out the animals and the traders. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus' action here is an amazing display of moral courage. Just as amazing is the fact that nobody laid a hand on Him. Nobody made an attempt to stop Him.

Oh, not that some people didn't object. They did. His actions bothered the religious rulers because Jesus was acting as if He owned the place. Well, He **DID** own the place! It was His Father's Temple and He was co-owner.

This is a very determined, very courageous, completely unapologetic act. Jesus didn't fly off the handle. He acted out of perfectly controlled anger.

But it wasn't safe

And it wasn't any safer when, at another Passover festival three years later, Jesus walked into the temple again, found the same travesty of merchandising in the Court of the Gentiles, and again cleaned house.

**Late (Matthew 21; Mark 11; Luke 19)**

***[Matthew 21:12] And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. [13] And He \*said to them, "It is written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER'; but you are making it a ROBBERS' DEN."***

So, He did this two times. The cleansings of the temple basically mark bookends of His three year ministry. Once at the beginning; once five days before His death.

The first time guaranteed the opposition of the Jerusalem religious elite. The second time guaranteed that the plot to put Him to death would be carried out quickly.

Cleansing the Jerusalem temple of abuses was not a safe play!

### **Conclusion:**

This morning I started out telling you about the African pastor who wondered out loud about the wisdom of John the Baptist's outspoken criticism of Herod and Herodias.

Well yes, had John the Baptist played it safe and NOT confronted Herod and Herodias - which would have been a very un-John like act of moral compromise - he probably would have lived longer and had a fruitful ministry of some duration.

But what if Jesus had accepted the safe route? What if He had not refused safety, had not taken risks, had not lived on the knife-edge of danger and disaster?

If He had taken the safe path He would not have arrived, at the end, at "Mission: Accomplished".

This morning we praise God that Jesus did not play it safe.

He was constantly challenging the status quo, risking failure to achieve progress, putting gains in jeopardy to consolidate more gains, all to arrive at that "Mission: Accomplished" - and He did it all to honor His Father and to bring you and me to God.

Refusing safety. That's what a Savior looks like, and that's just one more reason why we worship Him.

<sup>7</sup> Did He use the whip, you ask? Why else make it?