

*“The Good News: The Gift and Call of Prophecy”*

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

Third Sunday of Epiphany

Message for January 30, 2022

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Both of our wisdom teachings today illustrate the power of words. Jeremiah begins with, “The word of the Lord came to me.” That word leads to action, which produces results, and ultimately has consequences.

We see this first in the Book of Genesis, witnessing the power of a word from God. We hear, “then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God’s word accomplished the creative action. The word of God has the power to create or destroy and is not to be taken lightly.

In today’s Gospel reading we hear Jesus speaking words from ancient texts and stories as he reveals to those gathered that he has come to comfort and heal and redeem those who live on the margins rather than the “good” people who are worshiping together there that morning.

The verses from the First Testament tell of the call of Jeremiah, which is similar in several ways to the calls of Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, and Ezekiel - in each there is an encounter with the Divine, a commission to do God’s will or speak God’s word, and a ritual sign or act symbolizing the designated role. In all but Ezekiel’s case, the one who is called objects to the vocation and then is reassured.

I think many of us can relate to that impulse to object to God’s call: “Who, me?” How many times have we felt within ourselves or witnessed in others the call to show up in a particular place or time, to provide leadership or bring comfort or seek a solution - whether or not we felt equipped?

*No, you can’t mean me - I’m too inexperienced, or too old, or too tired. I’m not enough - strong enough, smart enough, brave enough.* When God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush and God tells him that Moses must go to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses says “Who, me!?”

Today we heard Jeremiah say, “Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child.” God reminds Jeremiah, *you aren’t doing this by yourself* - you shall go where I send you, speak what I command you - “for I am with you to deliver you.”

There is much we can learn from Jeremiah. The writer and minister, Eugene Peterson shows us what we might have in common with Jeremiah. Rev. Peterson wrote a translation of the Bible as he served his congregation, striving to provide more accessible “contemporary language” that his community would more readily understand. In his contemporary interpretation, entitled, “The Message,” he provides a rich description of Jeremiah, and I want to share his insights, which reveal how relevant this prophet is to us in our time.

He writes: *Jeremiah’s troubled life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., followed by the Babylonian exile. Everything that could go wrong DID go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of all of it, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering, and striving, writing and believing. He lived through crushing storms of hostility and furies of bitter doubt.* I imagine that like me, you can relate to this.

In this context, Peterson goes on to ask, *What happens when everything you believe in and live by is smashed to bits by circumstances? Sometimes the reversals of what we expect from God come to us as individuals, other times as entire communities. When it happens, does catastrophe work to re-form our lives to conform to who God actually is and not the way we imagined or wished him to be? Does it lead to an abandonment of God? Or, worse, does it trigger a stubborn grasping to the old collapsed system of belief, holding on for dear life to an illusion?*

So often we cling to dead structures and understandings that no longer serve us. In the case of the people of Judah, they moved further and further from their covenant with God. They were worshiping other gods and just going through the motions of honoring their agreements as God’s people.

As God appoints Jeremiah to the task of waking up these people and reminding them of their covenantal relationship with God, Jeremiah protests - *I don’t know how to talk to them, I don’t know how to convince them, I’m just a kid!* He doesn’t consider himself an accomplished or worthy spokesperson. He also knows there is a certain gravitas - the kind of maturity and serious demeanor (that comes, in part, with age) that does not yet reside in him.

Yet, if he were to remember his nation’s history, he would understand otherwise. When Yahweh chose a king to replace Saul, he didn’t choose the

eldest or tallest or the most handsome of Jesse's sons, but the youngest and least likely—David (1 Samuel 16). When Yahweh chose someone to face the giant, Goliath, he didn't choose the strongest man or the mightiest warrior but chose instead a shepherd boy armed only with a slingshot (1 Samuel 17).

Yahweh often prefers working with the least obvious person as a way of avoiding confusion. Nobody who sees a boy kill a giant with a slingshot can fail to see the hand of God behind the boy's success.

We see the same principle at work in the New Testament. In 1st Corinthians, Paul expresses it this way: "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

So today we hear God say to Jeremiah, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth." Jeremiah's task is not to preach creatively but to proclaim faithfully. He will not be responsible for devising clever ways of getting people's attention but will simply proclaim the words that Yahweh has given him.

Jeremiah's prophecy has two facets. On the one hand, he is to pronounce words of judgment—"to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow." On the other hand, he is to pronounce words of mercy and hope—"to build and to plant." As this is written, we hear more words of judgment than we do of mercy, which is in keeping with the character of Jeremiah's work. The order is intentional.

Israel must experience judgment before it can experience mercy. Only after the people of Israel experience judgment will they turn to God and seek his mercy.

We see this same tearing down and building up cycle at work in the life of Jesus. He died on a cross so that he might experience the resurrection and, in the process, defeat death once and for all.

Jeremiah's oracles of judgment put him at odds with the people of Israel - we see this also in this week's reading from Luke as Jesus speaks to the people in the synagogue.

Jesus' preaching begins with the word "Today." The prophets conveyed promises for the future, but Jesus conveys promises for today.

The waiting is over. The time has come. The Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus now. He brings good news to the poor today.

He proclaims, at this very moment, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. In this Gospel, Jesus will speak on several occasions of the kingdom of God as being already present.

It has been four hundred years since the people had seen a prophet, except for John the Baptist who is now preaching in the wilderness, and they don't expect today to be the day. It has been a long time—centuries—since God promised a messiah, and they have grown weary of waiting—like a guard fallen asleep at his post.

Jesus says, "TODAY this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." TODAY! But they aren't ready today! They begin by speaking well of Jesus, but almost immediately turn on him and try to kill him.

Jesus says, "Most certainly I tell you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown" (v. 24). Jesus cannot accept the narrowing of his mission that the people of Nazareth would impose on him. He cannot reserve his generosity for hometown folk. He cannot devote himself to the local arena.

Instead, he must tell them a truth that they do not want to hear, and he can predict their response. They are not going to be happy. Prophets are seldom popular because God sends them to say unpopular things. They tell of judgment and call people to make changes that they don't want to make.

This text is a prototype, a model, for the rest of Jesus' ministry - a continued emphasis on ministering to out-groups, and there will be growing opposition to Jesus by those who are invested in the structure remaining as it is, eventually leading to the crowd's insistence that Jesus be crucified. In the closing verse, Jesus passes through their midst and goes on his way.

Luke tells other stories of miraculous escapes in the Book of Acts, such as an angel freeing Peter from prison (Acts 12: 6-11) and later in that same book, crowds will stone Paul and leave him for dead, but he will revive and continue his journey and resume his ministry (Acts 14: 19-20).

It seems that Luke consistently provides the message that when a person responds faithfully to God's call, God will not allow that call to be thwarted. This might not mean total protection - as we know, many of the faithful have been imprisoned, stoned, beaten, and even martyred, but they haven't been stopped.

In today's opening music for our gathering, we heard the lyric, "I have a voice, we have a choice" which seems to echo the potential of the prophetic voice. What an encouragement, and a reminder that we each have a place in the world, in which we are responsible to bring forth our gifts and insights and experiences.

A calling or leading is not just reserved for those asked to do mighty things. It is the invitation to every Christian to witness to the gospel (Good News) by investing with radical grace whatever worldly roles God opens to us.

We hear this wisdom in many places. Mother Theresa reminded us, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Along the same lines, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way." And we hear in the Gospel of Matthew, as Jesus teaches through the Parable of the Mustard Seed, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

God calls whom God calls! It is no wonder that people protest their inadequacy at the time of their call. Who is adequate to speak for Yahweh?

The key to understanding is realizing that the fulfillment of the call is dependent, not on our ability, but on God. God enables those whom God calls.

The only question is not whether we are capable or worthy (which we are not) but whether we will answer the call—whether we will step out in faith and allow God to work through us.

May we each plant and tend what we are called to bring into the world, so that other living things may find sustenance and shelter in what grows from our offering.