

XIV Pentecost: Proper 16 (Year C)

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

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When Jan asked if I would preach in August before leaving for Saint Hilda's House, she probably didn't mean literally a few hours before I left. However, this afternoon I can breathe a sigh of relief knowing that I am on my way to Connecticut safely out of reach of any stones you may want to throw if this, my first Sunday sermon, doesn't go how any of us would like.

Jan and I also agreed that I should consider preaching on a topic similar to that on which I spoke at the last Tuttle Chapel of the school year at Wabash. That shorter sermon was about calling and vocation, something I've been thinking about a lot as a recent college graduate, but I was really hoping today to preach out of the lectionary, to do this properly. And then we get this Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, and I don't have to choose!

The book of Jeremiah begins with God calling a young boy to prophesy against God's people in the kingdom of Judah. He will be the last prophet in Jerusalem before the destruction of the city and the exile to Babylon. And I think it is a story that the Church, especially its young people, needs to read more often. Not because we have an incredible amount in common with his world, although acknowledging the similarities between the geopolitical situation in the modern Middle East and Jeremiah's time would not be unreasonable.

Jeremiah spent his entire life exhorting the people of Judah to return to God, for God had declared judgment against them. A little later in the first chapter we read, "Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the LORD; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah."¹ Judah has turned away from God, and the people will be punished. It is Jeremiah's job to tell Judah of their imminent doom and urge them to repent and follow the Lord. Pretty heavy stuff.

I say that we should read this not because I believe that God has declared imminent destruction for us here today. But rather because God calls Jeremiah to do something big, like he calls all of us to listen and respond likewise. This is a theme throughout scripture and has been a part of the Christian life since the earliest days of the Church. God has given each of us work, so to speak. He has buried deep within us—often imperceptibly deep—a calling and a purpose in this noisy, confusing world. At one level, all Christians are called to go and make disciples everywhere, baptizing and teaching the Gospel. This is the work of the Great Commission we find at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. But at another level, a more personal level, God has called us each to

¹ Jeremiah 1:14-15

specific vocations, and has given us the gifts we need to do this work. Jeremiah's calling was to an entire nation that had forgotten the good things God had done for them, forgotten his promises, and instead had broken their covenants and turned away from his law. I happen to be exploring a call to serve God in the Church as a priest, a call that is still forming every day. My calling is not your calling, nor yours your neighbor's. St. Paul understood this when he wrote to the Romans:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.²

As I look around this room, to this list I would add nurse, lawyer, teacher, judge, parent, mentor, child. God has blessed this parish and this community with incredible gifts, and has called us each by name to respond to his invitation. The only question that remains for us today is, how do we go out and do this? How do we even begin to respond to God's call?

I think that first of all, it takes discernment. It takes the hard work of listening to that voice buried deep within us, that voice that spoke up in one young boy the moment he heard his first piano sonata, or the voice that caught the attention of the girl who realized she had a knack for fractions and arithmetic in her middle school math class. For Jeremiah, it was God saying, "See, I have put words in your mouth. I have appointed you a prophet before I formed you in the womb." God speaks, and Jeremiah listens. Discerning the voice of God can take a long time, and we are very good at ignoring that voice, turning it off, pretending that God isn't calling us to something bold, new, something that might cause our neighbors to mutter under their breath. We are so good at saying, "Oh, that's not God," or, "Surely not me, God?"

Jeremiah protests his calling, saying, "I don't know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Jeremiah's youth and lack of experience were seen in his day as an indication that he was not ready. Too often we say the same thing to young people today. But God had different ideas for Jeremiah, and I believe that God has different ideas for us.

We're also very good at putting God in a box, thinking that our expectations of how God should act will be enough. "God wouldn't want me to go there," we say, "or to those people." We saw just this in our Gospel reading this morning, when the leader of the synagogue chides Jesus for healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath. For this man, there was no way that God could work outside of his understanding or framework for God's rules. But Jesus shows that his human framework is just that. In a moment of incredible transformation, God had different plans for Jesus, for the crippled woman, and hopefully, for the leader of the synagogue himself.

It's easier to talk ourselves out of listening to God when we do all of this work alone. Discernment isn't an isolated activity, at least not when done well. Community is a necessary

² Romans 12:4-8

tool for discerning where God is calling us. The people around us are often much better at recognizing our gifts and talents than we are. When a person expresses a desire to discern a call to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church, he or she is first paired with a parish discernment group, a committee of members of the congregation who meet regularly to ask the inquiring individual questions about his or her faith and listen to him describe the journey that led to this point. It is an essential component to discernment, but formal structures like these often support the misleading idea that a career in the Church is the only thing one can be called to, that vocation and discernment are church jargon and not for laypeople. I believe that we should establish discernment groups for all kinds of professions and decisions: choosing a college, buying a new house, moving across the country to take a new job. While a formal meeting of peers might be overkill in most situations, the acknowledgment that these decisions are better made within a community that is open to the Holy Spirit's beckoning could be not only edifying, but transformative. God has called each of us, somehow, to Saint John's, and to the wider Crawfordsville community, and has surrounded us with friends and mentors who help us discern these gifts. We should thank God for this place and these people in our lives, and we should listen to them.

So it takes discernment. But it also takes faith. It takes faith to follow where God leads, to answer the call to serve him in new ways. It takes faith to leave one's hometown, where we grow comfortable and feel safe, where our questions are more or less answered, where our friends are many and our cares few. In our Epistle last week, we heard in Hebrews of the faith of a whole slew of Old Testament figures: Rahab, Gideon, Barak, David, Samuel, the prophets—people who heard the call of God and responded, never perfectly, and certainly reluctantly at times. But through that faith, their response “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.”³ We have a great cloud of witnesses to inspire us to following God's call—the heroes of the Old Testament, the companions and blessed mother of Jesus, and two thousand years of the saints of the Church, stretching from the earliest Christians to those assembled here at Saint John's today. We don't need to reinvent the wheel each time God calls us to something new; we have their examples, their faith, and their never-ceasing prayers.

So it takes faith and courage, but we're certainly not doing it alone. This cloud of witnesses is nourished by the God who promises never to abandon us. God doesn't give Jeremiah marching orders with no roadmap. In the midst of setting out hard, serious work for Jeremiah, work which will set him against the “Kings of Judah, its princes, priests, and people,” God says, “I am with you...to deliver you.”

It is the promise repeated throughout scripture, from the earliest stories of Genesis to the life of Jesus and beyond. We read in our Psalm this morning those confident words of the psalmist, “I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;/from my mother's womb you have been my strength;/my praise shall be always of you.”⁴

³ Hebrews 11:33-34

⁴ Psalm 71:6

Jesus tells his disciples at the Great Commission after giving them (and us) some pretty hefty instructions, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”⁵ We are not alone in this journey. Jesus walks with us as we explore where we are called, as we explore who we are called to be. The Gospels teach us that Jesus knows what it’s like to struggle following God’s will, even to death. “I am with you always.” It’s all we need to get up and go and do the work God has given us to do. Jesus didn’t say that it would be easy. But he did promise to walk with us. And in a few moments we will have the chance to meet him in one place he promised to be present: at this altar, in bread and in wine. We’ll receive the living presence of Jesus into our lives, and then walk out those doors to follow his call. God is with us. Always. Thanks be to God.

⁵ Matthew 28:20