

The First Reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah 1:4-10:

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

⁶ Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

⁷ But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

⁸ Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.”

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

The Second Reading is from the Gospel of Luke 4:21-30:

²¹ Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³ Jesus [then] said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴ And he [continued] saying, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The Message is entitled, “The Antagonist”

“Now the word of the Lord came to me,” said Jeremiah.

Wouldn’t that be awesome, for God to speak so clearly and plainly to each of us?

Cheryl, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before I consecrated you; I appointed you...”

On second thought, do we really want to hear directly from God? Do we want to know without a shadow of doubt, whom we are called to be and what we are called to do? Jeremiah certainly wasn’t all that keen on what God had appointed him to do!

God appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations and Jeremiah quickly gave his rebuttal, "Hey God, I am only a boy!" Now what is not written is Jeremiah's inner dialogue that probably went something like this: "What are you thinking God, are you crazy? I'm too young. I'm too inexperienced. It sounds too risky, like I'd be putting my life on the line - literally. And by the way God, prophets don't have a good track record for growing old peacefully. So, thanks but no thanks, God!"

Did you hear as scripture was read what God wanted Jeremiah to do? He was appointing Jeremiah over nations and kingdoms. The words that he would be sharing would cause principalities and powers of nations and kingdoms to be plucked up and pulled down, destroyed and overthrown. I'm sure Jeremiah wasn't even able to hear the good news that his words were also going to build and to plant new things. I imagine that he figured he would be as good as dead long before any building or planting could happen!

And God, well God must have a sense of humor, for he said to Jeremiah rather matter of factly, "Do not be afraid!" Now this is what I imagine as Jeremiah's inner dialogue at this point: "Are you kidding me, God? Do not be afraid? Yet, I will be confronting the principalities and powers that have the power of life or death over me!"

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah..." What if the word of the Lord came clearly and directly to you or to me or to us, as the gathered church? Would we be excited and thankful, awe struck and humbled, or filled with fear and plenty of excuses? Do we really want to hear directly from God?

Well, the hometown crowd in Nazareth received a direct word from God, just not in the way they expected it. Let's take a deeper look at the context of the response Jesus received in Nazareth.

In the Gospel of Luke, as you recall, the first two chapters tell us of the birth of John the baptizer and then of Jesus. By chapter three John is grown and gathering folks at the Jordan for a baptism of repentance, while proclaiming that one greater than he is still to come. Chapter four begins as the Spirit leads Jesus, as a grown man, into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the wiles of the devil. Chapter four continues by telling us that once Jesus' wilderness experience was complete, he began preaching in synagogues throughout Galilee. His preaching gained him some notoriety and everyone was praising him.

Our text for this morning comes next in Luke's Gospel. We find Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. The text tells us he simply stood up to read. Imagine, Chris, if a hometown hero got up this morning right before you were to read the passage from Jeremiah and read the passage instead of you!

In Nazareth that day, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Jesus and he unrolled it and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [Isaiah 61:1-2a]

Jesus then rolls up the scroll and sits down. Everyone is transfixed on his powerful reading of the text. I imagine you could hear a pin drop. Then Jesus says to everyone in the synagogue, "Today...Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This is where we entered the text. The synagogue crowd is bursting with pride, reassuring each other that this is indeed Joseph's son. Yes, this is the Jesus we raised among us into adulthood. Just listen to how well he reads scripture; these words actually came alive within us, as he read them to us. Wow! Isn't this exciting!

What happens next though is not what the synagogue crowd expected. The hometown boy made good has been anointed by God to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow all assumptions about the God whom they have gathered to worship; about the God they keep neatly wrapped in their exclusive synagogue community.

As this scene unfolds, I imagine Jesus still sitting possibly, with his eyes most likely fixed on the powerbrokers of the synagogue, for he says:

"I suppose you're going to quote the proverb, 'Doctor, go heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we heard you did in Capernaum.' Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in his hometown."

This hometown boy made good is saying that he is a prophet! An anointed prophet if they heard the Isaiah text right. I imagine a stunned silence reverberated among the synagogue crowd.

Now prophets are not known to sugar coat things. They usually point out flaws in the way the people of God perceive God. They point out the disconnect between their claimed faith and lived faith. Prophets call people to repentance, to turn back to God more fully and faithfully. They call the people of God to align their walk with their talk and this call is rarely well taken.

Here we have a hometown boy pointing out the flaws of the religious community in which he grew up. I can only imagine that the people are saying to themselves, "I don't think so. We are not going to let this hometown boy talk to us like that! Just who does he think he is?"

Yet, Jesus doesn't stop by just identifying himself as a prophet. He continues by recounting stories of how God used people outside of the religious establishment for God's purposes:

"Isn't it a fact that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah during that three and a half years of drought when famine devastated the land, but the only widow to whom Elijah was sent was in Zarephath in Sidon? And there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha but the only one cleansed was Naaman the Syrian."

It seems to me that the prophet's role is to be an antagonist! Jesus intentionally stirs the pot. The synagogue crowd thought they were just coming for a nice Sabbath worship experience. You know, the kind that makes you feel warm inside and inspires everyone to be good and respectable. They had no idea that they would be jolted awake by such an abrasive message. What do you mean that God uses gentiles to make known God's presence and power? What do you mean that God doesn't always work through the synagogue and its people?

Anger boiled into rage in the synagogue in Nazareth that day. How dare you speak to us that way? How dare you say that God is working through others and not through us? The nice synagogue folks were enraged and they chased Jesus out and even tried to throw him off the brow of a cliff! Jeremiah was right about the fact that being a prophet is risky business, even life-threatening business!

I have often wondered if Jesus could have delivered the message differently? Is there a way to call God's people to repent, to turn back to God without inciting anger and rage? Or is the prophet's role to pluck up and tear down, to destroy and to overthrow all assumptions about the ways of God?

As Jacques Ellul said, "We've always been [called to be] holy troublemakers, we've always been [called to be] creators of uncertainty, agents of dimensions that are incompatible with the status quo." Is this how you see yourself as a Christian? Is this how we see ourselves as a church?

The synagogue crowd in Nazareth was full speed ahead with the status quo. Their community was a cozy community. Sabbath's were always pleasant, especially lunch after temple. They felt good about themselves, for they faithfully came to worship each Sabbath and offered their sacrifices to God as prescribed. They enjoyed the stability of their community. Then Jesus came along and messed things up! Jesus messed with their safe and secure understanding of the God whom they worshipped.

Yes, the God we proclaim and worship will not be domesticated writes David Ostendorf. He reminds us that we worship a dynamic, raucous God who jars us from our status quo. This raucous, dynamic God calls us into partnership with a new narrative, where all people, not just some people are God's beloved sons and daughters. God fulfilled through Jesus' life and ministry the words of the prophet Isaiah - "to preach good news to the poor, to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free."

Jesus doesn't soak in the accolades of those who praise him in Galilee or even in his hometown of Nazareth. No, Jesus unsettles everything and says that a faith settled and comfortable, is not God's new narrative.

When I reflect on the American Christian Church today, whether it is ours or our neighbors at Lord's corner, we probably all tend to settle in and shape communities that are comfortable and secure. We like the way things are and become angered or enraged with things threaten to be changed, especially if the change is not to our liking. The American Christian Church is filled with church hoppers, who hop from church to church in search of meeting their individualized needs of what's right for me, as if following Christ is about serving ourselves.

Listen again to the words Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." If our faith is not lived out in this way, then as Jesus says in Luke chapter 19, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out!" Could it be that Jesus was telling those in the synagogue that their witness had fallen silent? That they were not fulfilling their calling to be concerned with what concerns God?

When I think of those in the synagogue that day, I imagine they all had good intentions when they showed up for worship. I don't think any one of them would have denied or disowned the stories they knew from scripture about the widow from Zarephath or the leper Naaman from Syria. They probably knew of the countless times when prophets called the people of God to repent. But, what was annoying and down right rude was that Jesus was implying that they had also strayed, saying their lived faith had lapsed into self-serving comfort.

So, what about us? What would Jesus say to us? Are we more interested in our comfortable worship, than proclaiming good news to the poor? Are we more interested in maintaining the status quo, than releasing those held captive to poverty or injustice? Are we more interested in the survival of this church, then working to free the oppressed peoples of our communities and world?

I believe Jesus pierces the hearts of his hometown synagogue goers through his words, for his words asked of the people, "Are you concerned with the concerns of God?"

They were not.

The question for us today as a church is the same? Are we concerned with the concerns of God as the gathered church? My friends, I pray so. Amen.