

Epiphany 4C Sermon 013110
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The lectionary compilers – those people who worked together to decide what books and verses of the Bible we would read every week in our services – were at their best when they pulled together readings from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles and the Gospel that relate to each other in some way that gives them a common theme. When everything works perfectly, the readings tell us something thematic which is amplified (or at least complimented) by the hymns we sing. Well, this is one of those weeks where – I believe – if we look, we can find the readings taking us to an interesting place.

In the Old Testament reading, we are introduced to the prophet Jeremiah. When God called him to serve, Jeremiah was a boy who felt wholly unprepared to answer the call of God in this way. In the midst of Jeremiah's uncertainty, God tells him:

“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.” Then (Jeremiah) said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to (him), “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. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” Then the LORD put out his hand and touched (Jeremiah's) mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.”

And so it was, God took a young boy and put God's own words into the boy's mouth and made him a prophet. Fear had no place in the equation, because God had consecrated the boy from a time before he was born. His mission was to speak the prophetic word of God to the people and to preach to them in a way that would bring them back from a life of idol worship – a place of separation from God – back to living in union with their Creator. Jeremiah went from being a frightened young boy who answered God's call to spending over 40 years bringing a prophetic voice to God's people. But his prophecies were seldom heeded.

Psalm 71 is written in the style of King David – but some commentators have suggested that it might actually have been written by the prophet Jeremiah. Wouldn't that make for a great connection?

In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; *
let me never be ashamed.
In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free; *
incline your ear to me and save me.
Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe; *
you are my crag and my stronghold.
Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, *
from the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor.
For you are my hope, O Lord GOD, *
my confidence since I was young.
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.

The psalmist – whoever he or she might have been – was obviously someone who had experienced the strength and power of God's protective embrace, but was also someone

who harbored fear and doubt in the powerful help of God – in spite of what he had already experienced. If it was, in fact Jeremiah who wrote this psalm, we can understand why he wrote what he did. Prophets are typically not appreciated by many who hear them. They oftentimes tell people things they really do not want to hear and then the prophets pay for what they have done and said.

In the case of Jeremiah, the people to whom he spoke had wandered away from the God who had saved them from Egyptian slavery. When they were free from slavery, they acted as if they no longer needed God. Jeremiah brought them the news that God was angry with them for the way they were acting. The prophet told them that needed to remember who God was and who they were; otherwise their actions would have dire consequences.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus gets into the same trouble that Jeremiah got into. Jesus was in His home town, in His “home church,” if you will. He had impressed His friends and neighbors when he first started preaching to them. But then his message took a turn they didn’t like. Jesus told the people in Nazareth:

[Y]ou will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” [In other words, perform the miracles we heard you performed in Capernaum, so that we can believe that your message is from God.] And [Jesus] said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

And then He reminded them of two times when the people of Israel – God’s chosen people – had chosen not to pay attention to God, and the blessing that was meant for them

was given to someone else. In both of those cases, Jesus' audience would have understood that the prophet had gone to the people to try to change their hearts and minds before God took their blessings away.

It might be a little more difficult for us to understand how the reading from Corinthians fits in to the arc of the prophets' stories. But let's look at what the prophets did how they did it.

Jeremiah spoke out against the religious people of his time and they called for his execution. The prophet Elijah spoke out against those who were in power, and God led him to live in a dry river bed to hide out before sending him to a foreign widow whom God blessed with unending food and water. The prophet Elisha tried to take God's message to the people, but again they wouldn't listen. Instead, Elisha brought God's healing to Naaman, another foreigner who was blessed by God because, unlike the "chosen people," he received and heeded the message. Jesus told the people the truth and they wanted to kill Him. But Jesus walked through the crowd and left town. Although Jesus didn't die at the hands of the people on that day, ultimately they DID get their wish and on another day, in another city, He was executed. All through His ministry on earth, Jesus told people the truth, and for that, He died.

But the difference between Jesus and the other prophets was the way in which Jesus delivered the message of God to the people. Jesus WAS the Word of God. Jesus

WAS the embodiment of God. So His message was delivered in a very different, and very powerful way ... in the name of love.

St. Paul told the church in Corinth:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers (in other words, if I am a prophet of God), and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

We all have our moments of prophetic power ... those moments when we see and recognize God's involvement in a situation, or those times when we have a crystal clear image of what the truth is in a given situation. God calls us to act when those times happen – to speak out for God and against ungodliness. But if we act on God's behalf, if we speak out against those things that go against God's work in the world, but do not have love, we accomplish nothing – we are nothing more than noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

God calls us all to be God's eyes, ears, hands – and mouths in the world. We can all feel and believe that we are telling God's truth in any given situation; but if our words are not words spoken in love – as were the words of our Lord (even when He spoke hard truths) – then whatever we say will not be prophetic. Because prophetic words teach people something and ultimately make people's situations better. Words spoken without love can never be truly prophetic. Instead, they are only the sound of gongs and cymbals – just noise that distracts people from God's real work. Amen.