

## **Sermon, Epiphany 4C, February 3, 2019, Jane A. Beebe**

“Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." 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. 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 my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth.” (Jeremiah 1:6-9)

Jeremiah is called to a difficult, even harrowing task as a prophet. Over the course of fifty chapters of passionate, poetic words, he shows God’s people that despite their impending exile in Babylon, God’s word, in the mouth of Jeremiah, has the power to transform them. The ultimate return from exile is not only possible, but an outcome close to God’s heart. In the meantime it is Jeremiah’s task to show the way to repentance while also offering hope. Ironically, it is exile itself that allows Israel to re-form into the covenantal people God yearns for them to be. The first “word” that Jeremiah receives immediately after his call is this: “The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”” (Jeremiah 1:11-12)

A flowering almond with its delicate pink flowers is a beautiful image of new life. It is all the more startling for occurring at the beginning of Jeremiah’s prophetic journey. Implicit in the exile of the Hebrew people, harsh as it may seem in the handing over of Jerusalem to a foreign power, is a new spring. A branch—even of a flowering shrub—seems to reflect God’s assurance that, “...I am

watching over my word to perform it.” (Jeremiah 1:12) We are not used to thinking of God as having sorrows. As Walter Brueggemann observes in his commentary on Jeremiah, “Yahweh... wills a continuing relation with Israel. This will is rooted in none other than God’s inexplicable yearning, which is articulated in Jeremiah as God’s pathos, presented in turn through the pathos of the poet.” (Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming*, p. 5) Jeremiah is known as the “weeping prophet.” It takes courage to describe the truth of what is. That truth is not always welcome, yet becomes Israel’s saving grace.

God’s ongoing yearning is revealed, too, in Jesus’ role as prophet. Today we hear the other half of the narrative of Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth. begun last week. We are reminded of Jesus’ startling assertion that the words of Isaiah he has just read, “...are fulfilled in your hearing.” At first his listeners speak well of Jesus and show their amazement at the “graciousness” of his words. Yet this amazement seems to turn into skepticism. How can Jesus say such things? Isn’t he Joseph’s son? Perhaps it is their way of coping with the enormity of what Jesus is saying. It seems very human to attempt to control such a powerful message. We hear Jesus’ rueful response that, “...No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.” (Luke 4:24)

Jesus goes on to invoke two mighty prophets: Elijah and Elisha. To me they are the “superheroes” of the Hebrew Bible. I love hearing about their exploits. Yet

when Jesus does this, he pointedly reminds those gathered that both prophets perform key miracles of feeding and healing (as Jesus will also do) for people regarded as the enemy: those living in Sidon and Syria. This is enough to arouse violent indignation on the part of the assembly: they attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff! I think of a verse later in Luke when Jesus exclaims, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34) As in Jeremiah, we hear the pathos of God.

Jesus is not swayed. Almost mysteriously he is able to pass through the crowd and go on his way. Having these passages from Jeremiah and Luke juxtaposed led me to think about how God’s word comes to us. God actually places God’s own words in Jeremiah’s mouth. He does this by reaching out his hand and touching Jeremiah’s mouth. How often have we heard about Jesus reaching out his hand with a touch of healing or reassurance? God does not simply put words in Jesus’ mouth. Jesus comes to us as the Word itself. After leaving Nazareth for Capernaum, the first healing Jesus performs is for a man possessed by a demon. This time Jesus’ spiritual authority is recognized. “[The people] were all amazed and kept saying to one another, “What kind of utterance is this?” (Luke 4:36) The word “utterance” here is translated from the Greek: *logos*.

For several years I have subscribed to daily emails from SSJE. They call their short, daily reflections, “Brother, give us a word.” On their web site the brothers give this explanation: “Monasticism began when a few faithful men and women went into the desert to seek God and live a life of prayer. These Desert Fathers and Mothers, as they became known, were spiritual beacons whom other sought out for their wisdom in the ways of God. The seeker would approach and ask, “Father (Mother), give me a word.” The Brothers have adapted this ancient tradition for today, offering online a daily “word” to all who seek a deeper knowledge of God, a means of handing on what we ourselves have received.”

Maybe some of you have a favorite inspirational word or short Scripture passage. One of my guiding words is “surrender.” This can be a scary word at times. After all, the Wicked Witch of the West writes “Surrender, Dorothy!” in the sky—surrender does not bode well for Dorothy! However, I have learned to listen when the word “surrender” either enters the conversation or appears in something I am reading. On January 22, 2011, I met with Bishop Scruton one-on-one as part of the process towards postulancy. I had already met with members of the Commission on Ministry and my Vestry, and submitted my application. I

remember the exact date because it is my mother's birthday. It was a bitterly cold day in the middle of Epiphany, just like now.

I do not remember the Bishop's exact words, perhaps it was when we were praying together. I do remember that he used the word "surrender." After that our conversation took a turn. The Bishop showed me the map of our Diocese with all its parishes: north to south, east to west. As you know our Diocese covers most of the Commonwealth. He pointed out there was at least one parish led mainly by a lay leader. The Bishop invited me to use the Ignatian method of discernment: weighing two possibilities to see which one had more vibrancy. We discerned that either I was called to more pastoral ministry as a lay person, or I was called to ordination to the priesthood. I laughed a little to realize that, really, if I responded faithfully, the preparation would look much the same. However, if I were ordained, I could do more "things." There was no "either/or" any more. The answer was simply, "Yes."

I have learned that it is safe to surrender to God—although sometimes still fearful. It is a posture I can take as a *first* resort, even if I am afraid or unsure of the outcome. The Benedictine Rule shows the importance of this attitude in following the spiritual life in its "Ladder of Humility." The Rule states, "The seventh degree of humility is: to grow in understanding that if I consider myself lower than everyone else, I raise up others." (*Benedictine Rule*)

Being humble is about our relationship to God. We recognize that there is something greater than ourselves with the power to offer grace and salvation. It is not about being obsequious or unctuous, or at any time being less than who we are. Through humility we begin to see ourselves and accept ourselves as God sees us: as whole human beings. We are then able to grow into seeing and accepting each other with the same grace. John Ackerman wrote a wonderful book called: *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations*. In chapter 5, “Discernment,” he lists what he has come to recognize as reliable signs of grace. (There are unreliable signs as well). Surrender is key.

1. “We experience a transformation of behavior and character. We are surprised at grace, goodness, that we did not manufacture.
2. We know a new affection for God for God’s sake, not for God’s gifts. We are able to love God when things don’t go well, when we’re depressed, when we don’t have any good feelings or thoughts.
3. We discover a new sense of knowing. This knowing is more than intellectual assent; it is a deep trust, a personal conviction. We don’t have to browbeat others; we are able to love our enemies, particularly in our family and those at the other end of the political spectrum.
4. We experience balance in our lives. We keep the Sabbath, we can play, we can laugh at ourselves.
5. We know how to surrender and how to persevere. Suffering and obedience go together. Obedience is made perfect through suffering.”

Grace comes when we surrender to what is. We are able to love God even when we are in pain or things do not go well. While we are in a stage of “transition” or “dark night” it is tempting to mistrust God and ourselves, to want to give up.

Ironically, we then block the grace that would allow us to move naturally into the next stage. I heard someone describe the spiritual journey as being in a series of canal locks. The ship has to sit in the lock and wait for the water to lift the ship to next level. Could God's word be that lock, a place where we can dwell until lifted up to the next level?

Rowan Williams said this: "My existence in the world, *including* my need to imagine this as personal, active and giving, is 'of God'; my search for an identity is something rooted in God's freedom, which grounds the sheer *thereness* of the shared world I stand in... Before we are looked at, spoken to, acted on, we *are*, because of the look, the word, the act of God... Our reality is not and cannot be either earned by us or eroded by others." (Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*)