

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the fourth Sunday of Epiphany, February third in the year of our LORD 2019. It is based on the following scriptures:

Psalm 71:1-6

71:1 In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

71:2 In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

71:3 Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

71:4 Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

71:5 For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

71:6 Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1:4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

1:5 "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."

1:6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child."

1:7 But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you,

1:8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

1:9 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.

1:10 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."

A reading from the Good News of Luke 4:14-30, Adapted from The Message

14 Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit.

News that he was back spread through the countryside.

15 He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure.

16 Jesus came to Nazareth where he had grown up.

As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place, called the synagogue.

He stood up to read,

17 he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

18 God's Spirit is on me;

God has chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

God's has Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
19 to announce, "This is God's year to act!"
20 Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down.
Every eye in the place was on him, intent.
21 Then Jesus started in,
"You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

22 All who were there, watching and listening, were surprised at how well he spoke.
They said, "Isn't this Joseph's son, the one we've known since he was a youngster?"

23 He answered, "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.'
24 Well, let me tell you something: No prophet is ever welcomed in the prophet's hometown.
25 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,
26 but the only widow to whom Elijah was sent was in Saraphath in Sidon?
27 And there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha but the only one cleansed was Naaman the Syrian."
28 That set everyone in the meeting place seething with anger.
29 They threw him out, banishing him from the village, then took him to a mountain cliff at the edge of the village to throw him to his doom,
30 but he gave them the slip and was on his way.

In our Bible stories for today
there are prophets and proclamations,
resistance and rage.
Jeremiah and Jesus share the call to speak truth that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable;
Their call is to stand up when no one invites them to stand;
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant."

They both were called, destined,
from before they were in their mother's wombs.
Both speak what the Spirit of God calls them to speak, even in the face of rejection,
even on the brink of destruction.

Jeremiah was from the walled city of Anathoth.
He was called to deliver the very hard message that God was going to discipline the land of Judah.
You see, prior to Jeremiah's call, Manasseh, one of the Kings of Judah, not only encouraged the people to turn away from YHWH and worship idols, but the King burned his own sons alive as a sacrifice to the god Molech.
Given such a violent rejection of YHWH's steadfast love for the people of Judah,
God's discipline was strict and severe.
Jeremiah's message of discipline included the prophecy that the nation of Babylon would come from the west and conquer Judah and take its people captive. It was not a popular message.
It was certainly not well received in Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth.
Chapter 11 of Jeremiah recounts the threat from its citizen's on Jeremiah's life:
*"You shall not prophesy in the name of the LORD,
or you will die by our hand"* (Jeremiah 11:21).

Jesus was from the little village of Nazareth;
a tiny town about the size of Tontogany.

It is impossible to suppose that the people in the synagogue on the day that Jesus stood up to read did not know who it was that was reading.

Or did they?

They were quite sure he was simply Joseph's son.

Perhaps they pictured a little boy running around town with saw dust in his hair;
or interrupting worship with his precocious answers;
or telling some tale about angels showing up when he was born.

I have been wondering about the story behind the story:

Not just about the preconceived notions of those gathered in the synagogue,
but of the pain that Jesus carried into that space from his childhood experiences.

I have been wondering

because it seems that the question

"Is not this Joseph's son?"

sparked in Jesus a passionate rebuke of the deepest kind.

Had Jesus been bullied as a child?

Had someone pierced his heart by making fun of his dad?

Did he over hear folks gossiping about his mom?

Whatever it was that moved him,

Jesus not only calls them out for their current day rejection,

but reminds them that their ancestors had no use for the healing powers of the prophet Elisha
and no respect for the great Hebrew Prophet, Elijah. It's like he smacks them where it hurts most.

Your rejection of prophets is nothing new.

It's built into your DNA.

And what about the pain of the listeners?

Granted, Jesus words were very harsh and very personal.

But it is one thing to throw him out of the synagogue and quite another to drive him to the edge of a cliff
that he might die at their own hands.

The story is not clear why their emotions stirred like a storm that could not be stopped.

The only guess I have—and it is only a guess—

is that they knew the meaning associated with the Isaiah passage.

They knew it was about the Messiah.

They knew when Jesus said

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"

that he was claiming to be the Messiah.

One of their little street urchins claiming to be the Anointed One of God?!

What an embarrassment!

This was not only outrageous,

but reason enough for execution.

Jeremiah's hometown story is a hard story.

Jesus' hometown story is a hard story.

But what do these stories have to do with you, Tontogany?

Some of you know what it is to be rejected by your hometown:

To have people draw assumptions

about your message

or your abilities

or your character based on who you were,

or who people perceived you to be

12 or 27 or 40 years ago.

Though you now have a message of hope,

a message of healing,

a willingness to stretch out your hand

and help your town

or your school

or your neighborhood in wise and graceful ways,

you and your message,

you and your help,

you and your grace are rejected outright.

After all, you ought to know you will always be only Joseph's son.

If this has been your experience,

know that your pain is shared

by Jeremiah and by Jesus,

by Elijah and Elisha.

If this is your experience,

know that one of the reasons Jesus came was to carry your pain and be acquainted with your grief.

Perhaps some of you know what it is to reject your own.

To be suspicious;

to be certain that there is nothing new in Tontogany and what has been will be.

You have been certain that so and so could not possibly bring good news

or shed light

or set anyone free.

If this has been your experience,

know that your reaction is not unique,

but rather common to the human story of assumptions.

If this has been your experience,

know that one of the reasons Jesus came was to awaken you to the possibility

of being like the widow of Zarephath

and like Naaman the leper

who acted against the prevailing rage of the day

and were given blessings

and healing for themselves and their households.

And finally sisters and brothers,
this story may be quite relevant for your future.

I have said before and I will say again that I believe God is calling some of your people to be prophets;
to speak on behalf of God that the Good News of Jesus Christ might be proclaimed to the poor,
the captive,
the blind
and the oppressed;
to declare that God's favor is on the move.

If I say
"God is calling some of your people to be prophets so that the love of God may be declared to the world"
you may cheer and say "Amen!"

But will you feel the same if God calls that prophet to speak, not to a distant world, but directly to you?
Will you feel the same if that prophet feels called to speak truth to you when it is hard, so very hard to hear?

If this is to be your experience,
know that God is not a god of assumptions,
one that assumes you will respond like Anathoth and Nazareth.
No! God is the God of
New Beginnings,
New hopes,
New callings,
New faith in you.

If this is to be your experience,
know that one of the reasons Jesus came was so that the Spirit of the LORD would be upon Tontogany
that deeds of power might be done here as they were in Capernaum;
as they were in Sidon;
as they are even now in Syria.
Take refuge, Tontogany
and do not be put to shame
for Jesus Christ is here to deliver you.

Now may our God who calls,
The One who opens ears to hear.
Speak truth to your heart
Speak honor to your spirit
Speak courage to your mind
And Speak into your town
Generosity
Freedom
Light
&
Peace
Now and for a thousand generations.

