

Fourth Sunday After The Epiphany – Zach Marshall

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Wow, what a set of passages we have this week! We've got one of the famous passages of prophetic calling from the book of Jeremiah; we've got a pretty familiar psalm about divine rescue; we've got the chapter that people love to have read at their weddings ("Love is patient, love is kind"); and we have one of those passages where Jesus makes everybody in the room really mad and they drive him out of town, as Christina Smerick pointed out last week, to the edge of a cliff. What a holy mess! I suppose it makes sense in a way—the weeping prophet's calling combined with a passage about Jesus being ostracized, and then a psalm about rescue and the great Protestant saint's admonition that we should love people. Love, people. Almost like Paul is saying, don't try to do what Jesus—or Jeremiah—did unless you can prove you're doing it according to an impossibly high standard of love.

I want to put 1 Corinthians 13 aside for a moment and focus on the other passages, because I think we're a little numbed by how that passage rings with the ghosts of weddings past in our ears—it changes the tenor of the other passages. I want to see if I can pull something out of the Jeremiah and Jesus stories by retelling them a couple different ways. I believe that our understanding of these stories, and maybe most stories, is colored by how we picture them in our heads. One of my greatest frustrations with biblical interpretation is that people seem to want to live by the Bible and do what the Bible says, but they also want to ignore the fact that everyone imagines in their heads something different when they read the Bible. Most of us are conditioned to picture biblical texts in specific ways. Let's take the Jeremiah passage as an example. *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.* We very much like this passage. God knew us. From our beginnings. And this verse is commonly cited in contemporary debates about social issues and at baby showers. Fine, but this passage isn't about cute babies—it's about some guy being ordered by God to tell the nations that they're in major trouble: *to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.* And not just the enemy nations but also his beloved homeland. How do we imagine this encounter between Jeremiah and the Almighty?

I think that we imagine a pious young Jeremiah praying in a stone-paved temple. It's either late evening or early morning, depending on your preference, but dark nonetheless. Suddenly, a faint wind stirs the hangings and gutters the candle flames, and Jeremiah hears a voice out of the darkness. It's Charlton Heston's deep bass voice. The camera holds the scene a long time while Heston delivers a voiceover of the divine lines: *You shall go to all to whom I send you. ... Now I have put my words in your mouth.* Jeremiah has taken his shoes off out of reverence—he knows what to do in the divine presence. Then a full orchestration enters slowly with a melody that increases in intensity. Jeremiah is stunned, but not exactly surprised given his obvious piety. He leaves with glowing face (and a few more gray hairs) to deliver the Word of the Lord to kings, which unfolds through an uplifting montage as the orchestra tells the story of his success.

You see it, right? That's how encounters with God go, right? Let's linger with it a moment longer to see it from a different view. I wonder if we should take a leaf out of other parts of the Bible—I always like how the angels in Daniel remind their audiences not to freak out, to take some deep breaths. Later in the first chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet sees a smoking pot facing the north—not unlike the torch or *smoking oven* in some translations that Abram sees passing between the halves of the animals that he recently hacked apart before going to sleep beside

them. Let's draw our imagery from there. Jeremiah's outside at dusk, an awkward teenager dutifully doing his chores. He starts hearing things among the animals, in the shadows, by the low brush at the edge of the gravelly yard his dad keeps their animals in. The camera jumps around—from the goat's head with its creepy slitted pupils to shadows by the walls and gates, zooming in quickly before cutting to another spot—Jeremiah's face—close up on his mouth breathing quicker—the single bead of sweat slipping down his temple. The viewer realizes: something's not right with this kid. The sound is quiet, but not like in old movies where it's just turned off—more like a recording of a quiet empty house at night: we hear breathing, a creak, one drawn-out high-pitched note from a violin to build the tense jump scare that's coming.

Then we hear God's voice: it's a tense whisper behind Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.* Jeremiah whips around. The goat runs away. There's the creepy-looking bare almond tree. He hears the voice behind him again: *You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it.* He whips around and sees the family pot in the cookyard, smoking! Oh, my God! nobody was out here, let alone cooking, what's going on?! God is calling a young person to tell the world that destruction is coming, to enemy nations and to the rulers of his own town and country. It's not exactly a mountaintop experience. Is it any wonder that Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet? Sometimes it takes a vision of terror to stick with a person so they can keep going through with their difficult task.

Okay. Let's move on to the gospel passage. I want to tell it three ways, four if you count me reading it a few moments ago. I ask you to think about where you are in each story—whom you identify with. It makes a difference. Here is the first version, and the way that I think most of us usually imagine it. Jesus is in a synagogue in Nazareth. It's a dusty Middle Eastern town with stone buildings, narrow streets, and decent views of distant hills covered in scraggly brush. The synagogue is large with stucco walls and a few tapestries, and the people stand as they listen to the reading of the sacred books. Jesus enters, dressed in white with a red sash, or a blue sash, depending on your politics. He's easily two inches taller than everyone in the room, has Norwegian features, blue eyes, and beneath his white head covering, straight brown flowing hair that comes past his shoulders. It's clear he uses a lot of conditioner to get hair that silky soft. His face bears a somewhat vapid expression that is supposed to suggest a holy aura—you've seen it in paintings I'll bet. He's with his twelve disciples, who are all middle-aged men, fairly sturdy and well put together, wearing drab striped robes and head coverings like everyone else in the room; most are bearded, like Jesus, and they huddle together slightly behind Jesus, a little self-consciously.

As Jesus slowly walks toward the front of the synagogue, everyone starts noticing him, row by row: the people and then the scribes conducting the services. Who wouldn't want to look at such a good-looking, peaceful person? The scribes stop; Jesus, now at the front, extends his hand quietly. It's not a commanding gesture, but it's clear what he wants. They hand him the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolls it a little bit and reads one of our favorite passages in a voice like Benedict Cumberbatch (except with an American accent, not a British one, since Jesus wasn't British):

*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.*

Then he announces, somehow amplified throughout the full room, *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* The camera looks back to the scribes and the congregation, who are now murmuring to each other: *Isn't this Joseph's son?* Then Jesus proceeds in his mild voice, *No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.* The camera looks back to the scribes, who are now obviously offended but looking officious, ready to bring the kabosh down on this nonsense, and the crowd who are now obviously upset and filled with overprotective families—respectable mothers hiding their children's faces in their skirts as they scowl at Jesus, respectable fathers shaking their fists in those ineffectual movements of a mob ready to form once the first person does something other than shake their fist angrily. There's the murmur of everyone talking loudly. Jesus' disciples make a move for the back door while the crowd stiffly, awkwardly but almost civilly pushes Jesus out of the synagogue, ending with one ineffectual push of Jesus into the dust. There, take that! Jesus gets up with a look that would have seemed haughty on any other face, and leaves town with his sheepish disciples. This is the mild white Jesus we've come to appreciate, who's always on our side and against those hypocrites over there. The loving Jesus who would never say anything hurtful, unless it was to an evil Pharisee. We like it. Maybe a little boring to watch, but definitely safe.

Here is the second version of the story: Jesus is still in Nazareth, but where is Nazareth? It's a dusty town, kind of near the urban center of Capernaum, where people can get into a little bit of debauchery or emperor worship if they want to, but far enough away to have a degree of separation from all that. Nazareth is fairly poor, like most colonial towns of the outer rim of the Roman Empire. At a small synagogue in town, the faithful members of the beloved community gather to hear the sacred words of scripture read and to meditate on what they might mean for their difficult lives, lived out under an oppressive regime. They have dressed their best for the Sabbath but are obviously poor. The educated scribe who leads them every Saturday gets up, his head appropriately covered with his prayer shawl, and starts to recite, *Baruch Adonai, Elohim Israel.* Then a man enters.

The man is obviously not from town. He's very sunburnt, and his drab, well-worn clothes show a combination of sweat, smoke, and dust; his feet are heavily calloused so that you almost feel sorry for them. He's short, stocky, and his thick black hair has receded quite a bit from the front of his head. He's followed by a small troop of angular young men, ranging from snot-nosed teens to confused mid-twenty somethings and a couple of uncomfortable-looking middle-aged folk in once well-to-do robes. Most of the troop waits outside, but a few come in. The man puts his prayer shawl over his head as he enters—everyone is already looking right at him, and after he pushes to the front of the crowd, he asks the head scribe if he can read. His voice is rough from addressing large crowds outdoors—a voice we can't easily imagine, maybe like a serious Tom Waits. The scribe stares at the stranger, slightly annoyed. But he recognizes in the man's face a more lined version of an awkward but dutiful young man whom some people said heard voices and who had left town to study the scriptures more fully. This recognition moves him to humbly yield; he exhales, loosens his shoulders, and hands the man the scroll of Isaiah. The congregation looks hungrily at the newcomer, anticipating what he will read and say. They bow as the man reads from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,

Because He has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor.

The congregation lift their heads; the head scribe lifts his head. Yes. Despite the man's rough edges, this is the Word of the Lord. Next comes the newcomer's commentary: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

The record needle scratches. Wait, what?! The scribe chokes. He interrupts: "Aren't you Joseph's son?" The dirty, travel-worn man turns to him; he's affronted, and he shows it. "Yeshua, what do you think this is?" Jesus is ready for him: "Well ... they say a prophet is never welcome in his hometown." Then, the man gets carried away. "You think you're special? Well guess what: you know your second favorite prophet, Elijah? Yeah, well, he could have helped any of the poor widows in Israel—they were going through a drought, after all. But no, he went to the land of the heathen to the north to help a widow there! Oh, and you know that prophet's apprentice, Elisha? The bald, ugly guy who called bears on children who insulted him? Yeah, well he didn't help any Israeli lepers either—he healed a general of the enemy army that eventually would come to crush your entire land. So there!"

The crowd is incensed. "How dare this schmuck who ran away from this dead-end town come back here now to lecture us? We don't have anything! At least let us have our beliefs. At least let us have our traditions and tell our beloved stories to soothe our pain after all these centuries of being kicked around by immoral nations all around us. We've been the righteous ones. Not all those sons and daughters who ran off to Capernaum to worship the emperor or squeeze money out of their fellow countrymen. How dare you insult what we believe most deeply?" And they seize the short, unattractive man by his worn garments, drag him across the paved floors and through the gravelly streets. They consider throwing him off a cliff, but they're not quite up to it, so they deposit him beyond the town gates, where his scanty disciples were already skulking, waiting for him, knowing what was coming.

Here is the third story. Can you handle one more? We're no longer in Nazareth. Let's head from the backwater town to the world empire. We are in a church. It's a somewhat large, well-kept church, able to seat 500 when they pack it out. Well-lighted from hanging fixtures, clean carpets, pristine drywall, the smell of new building materials from a recent renovation; the pews have cushions; there is a raised stage, a quality sound system, and a group of men in the back mixing the sound and adjusting the spotlights so it all comes out just right. A praise band who wears trendy clothes performs a few traditional hymns and a few praise choruses—got to keep everyone happy. The minister wears a well-fitting suit or perhaps a black robe and appropriately colored stole. The members of the congregation are well fed and happy to be in church, except for the teenagers; some are well dressed in trendy or well-made clothes, although a lot of them wear exercise clothes since Sunday is their one day to relax.

Outside the church, a man walks the streets of the wealthiest, most powerful empire on earth. He has to walk through the grass for a bit since there's no sidewalk to the church. Everyone drives; the nation has worked it out so that fuel prices are cheap, and people don't feel complete if they do not own a car. As the man walks through the parking lot, he sees that it is nearly full of cars—everything from Ford Explorers to Toyota Priuses. The man enters the church and is greeted by a friendly middle-aged woman, who gives him a flyer about the church since he looks new.

The congregation is made up of very middle-class people. They would be quick to point out that they're not rich, not the ones who pull the strings of power in the most powerful nation on earth,

but they would also acknowledge that there are people in the world who have less. The congregation sits as the singing has now come to the end. The praise band silently leave their instruments on stage while the pianist plays during a transitional prayer. The man makes his way up the aisle. From the front pulpit, the minister hesitates. He sees that the strange man who just entered isn't dressed like everyone else in the church. His coats, pants, skin color, hair style, and gait all signal that he's definitely not the typical clientele. The minister hopes to God that the strange man is just having trouble finding a seat in the crowded church. Yes, he can see that the only open aisle seats are in the first three rows, so it makes sense that the man is heading all the way up the central aisle. But he doesn't stop there. The strange man makes his way up the steps to the stage on which the pulpit and the minister now stand. It's awkward. It's awkward. What's he doing there?

There is no background music now because the minister is supposed to start reading the daily scripture. It's not a prayer or communion time when the pianist keeps playing to cover up the terrible almighty silence. The man whispers something to the minister. This is totally uncalled for. The minister explains to the man that they were just about to read the passage for the day—you can hear his voice slightly far away since he's not speaking directly into the mic. The man says, "Fine." He gestures. It looks like he wants to read it. The congregation is silent, except for the teenagers who cope with awkwardness by snickering to each other. The minister is in an awkward place. Should he kindly but firmly ask the man to sit down? Yes. Of course, the man was probably drunk. No one else would act so unusually in a church. But the man is insistent, and the minister doesn't want to cause a scene, so he gives in and explains into the mic, hoping it will smooth the awkward transition, that "A guest will be reading today's passage." It's from the book of Isaiah. The man reads too loud into the microphone at first, but the sound crew adjusts.

*He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free.*

At the end of the passage, the man does the unthinkable. He raises both hands up and says, *Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* The congregation gapes. The teenagers in their reserved pew are having trouble holding in their mirth. A few whispers run through the audience. Someone in the tenth row coughs loudly. But nobody moves. They're not a mob; they are middle-class, kind, benevolent, ineffectual, and good at ignoring unpleasantness. The man continues: "What did you expect? Many of God's greatest prophets came to people other than you. Do you wonder why?" The minister quickly steps in and rescues them, saying, "Yes, thank you, sir, if you'll just take a seat now..." A group of ushers quickly and quietly guide the man to a seat, but he doesn't want to sit down, so they quietly follow him to the back and out of the church. They give him a can of soup from the food pantry as he goes. The entire congregation breathes a sigh of relief as the minister begins his sermon with a funny story about when he was a younger and more foolish man. The congregation is relieved. What the man said insulted them. But then again, you don't need to get too upset when you live in the most powerful nation on earth; you don't have to listen to new prophets who come along. Change will only destabilize what you have learned to hold dear, so you convince yourself there's nothing you can do anyway.