

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 31, 2016
The Rev. Denise Trogdon, Rector

The Voice of our Calling

O Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and fill them with your fire, Amen.

It's possible I have been cooped up too long, but it occurs to me that today's lectionary can best be understood when we put together the readings over the last few weeks. Since we were snowed out of church last Sunday, forgive me if I sound like the beginning of a TV episode: Previously at Holy Cross!

We have embarked upon the Epiphany journey, where Christ's identity first proclaimed by the magi, is affirmed in his baptism. The voice of God claims Jesus as God's beloved Son. Then we hear of his first miracle at the wedding of Cana and the beginning of his ministry. Last week's gospel brings Jesus to the synagogue in Nazareth. Here he preaches his first sermon. Jesus reads the scripture 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, to let the oppressed go free," Claiming his identity established in baptism, Jesus stuns the crowd saying, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." What we hear in the gospel this morning is the response of the people in the synagogue disturbed by his teaching. They drive him out, nearly throwing him off of a cliff. Being a prophet, especially in one's hometown is a dangerous vocation indeed.

The epistles from Paul to the Corinthians over the last few weeks, tell of how the early Christ followers struggled to come to terms with the implication of their own baptisms. Paul's words encouraged them to embrace their identity as the body of Christ, called with a variety of gifts, to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. In this morning's epistle, Paul teaches that the most important gift God bestows upon us is a love that endures all things, and empowers us for ministry.

If we were to grapple with the same questions; what does it mean for me to be baptized into the Body of Christ, and how do we live into our calling; we might identify the most with the first lesson this morning. It is the story of the prophet Jeremiah's call from God, and his most human response. God's call to serve as a prophet to the people of Judah came unexpectedly to this young boy, and without welcome.

Jeremiah lived in a divided kingdom where the Northern Province of Israel was under Assyrian rule and the Southern territory of Judah, under siege. His ministry witnessed the rise of the Babylonian empire and the fall of Jerusalem that led to exile. God spoke to Jeremiah appointing him to be a prophet to the nations. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you."

The title prophet means to speak on behalf of. Jeremiah was called to speak to the people of Judah and the surrounding nations, on behalf of God. He was given this daunting task of proclaiming judgment against a kingdom that had broken covenant with the Lord, to call them back to faithfulness. Unlike the prophet Isaiah who said, "Here am I, send me!" Jeremiah's response was filled with anxiety and a sense of inadequacy. "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!" But God chose one who was not prepared, whom God would equip and accompany. "Do not be

afraid, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” We’ve heard this scenario before in the story of Moses and his calling at the burning bush. He too, felt ill equipped to speak on behalf of God and resisted what God envisioned. Yet each step Moses took in faith to fulfill God’s plan, God empowered him to accomplish. So with Jeremiah, God put words in his mouth and gave him authority to speak hard truths. God convicted Jeremiah to pluck up, to tear down and to build new hearts, faithful to God.

If all call narratives were this dramatic most could rest assured that God hasn’t thundered onto the scene and announced for you a new prophetic vocation. A call on your heart does not indicate that you must leave your life as you know it and enter the priesthood. God is so much more creative and beckons us to serve in many capacities. But our human response is to believe we’re not up to the task. We find reasons to discount the voice of our calling. I am too young, or I am too old or too busy, or like Jesus experienced in his hometown, the voice sounds too familiar to be God’s. Whatever our resistance, God draws us in sometimes changing our hearts, sometimes changing our circumstances, always giving us grace to choose.

As the fourth of four daughters, I often felt that mine was the last voice to be heard. Perhaps that was the hidden draw to becoming a therapist, people actually paid me for my opinions! But the gentle impression of calling came when I was young, before women were ordained and way before I could understand the blessings and challenges involved. God did not call me because I was equipped. Nor did I respond with zeal and passion at the time. It took 26 years and plenty of side roads. God chooses us, tells us not to fear and equips us with what we need.

To discern God’s voice one must be listening creatively. A call may come in quiet impressions that won’t leave us, a scripture that suddenly has new meaning, a prophetic word from a stranger. But what an encounter with God asks us to consider, is if we have limited our imagination or hardened our heart to the possibilities God has for us. Then God waits for us to say yes. Sometimes we don’t respond until our own plans or priorities have failed us. Often it is in our brokenness that we open ourselves to God’s plan for our lives.

An old Hasidic tale tells of a small boy that comes to a rabbi and asks “Why does the Torah tell us to place holy words upon our hearts and why does it not tell us to place them in our hearts?” The rabbi answers, “it is because as we are, our hearts are closed. We cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts and they stay until one day the heart breaks, and the words fall in.” The voice of our calling has a way of plucking up, tearing down and building our hearts anew for God.

If this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing, the word “today” insists that we embrace the now of our calling. Today reminds us that we can be agents of God’s work. As the body of Christ we are imbued with a variety of gifts to accomplish the task. We have only to listen with our hearts. I invite you to consider how God might be calling you to use your gifts. I am reassured by the words of theologian Frederick Buechner, “The place God calls you to, is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Today we will embark upon a series of listening sessions where we will engage in dialogue with one another and listen for the voice of God’s calling for this congregation. We will listen for prophetic voices and consider in prayer how God wants us to use our gifts in this particular body of Christ. May we have the wisdom to hear the voice of our calling and the courage to say yes. And when our hearts are broken, I pray that we can envision holy words dropping in to empower and encourage us. Late in his calling, Jeremiah received these words to comfort those who had lost heart, “ For surely I know

the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. When you search for me, you will find me if you seek me with all your heart.” Amen.