

Creating a Holy Disturbance: When Following God's Expectations Clashes With What We Were Taught

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet & consecrates him in the womb. Jeremiah's task is to preach God's word amid the difficult political realities of his time, before the Babylonian exile. He is to make God known not only to Judah, but also to the nations.

⁴Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ⁵"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, & before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." ⁶Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, & you shall speak whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." ⁹Then the Lord put out a hand & touched my mouth; & the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations & over realms, to pluck up & to pull down, to destroy & to overthrow, to build & to plant."

Luke 4:21-30

People in Jesus' hometown are initially pleased when he says that God will free the oppressed. Their pleasure turns to rage when he reminds them that God's prophetic mission typically pushes beyond human boundaries so that mercy & healing are extended to those regarded as outsiders.

²¹Then Jesus began to say to all in the synagogue in Nazareth, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him & were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"²³ Jesus said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Dr, cure yourself!' & you will say, 'Do here in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴& he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in their hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up 3 years & 6 months, & there was a severe famine over the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, & none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove Jesus out of town, & led him to

the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But Jesus passed through the midst of them & went on his way.

Called to Domestic Disturbance

At 1st, Jesus is seen as the hometown boy made good. Something changes. Is it the mention of Jesus being the son of a local carpenter, Joseph? Does Jesus sense that people are proud of his learning but less eager to engage in his teachings? Is it that people's expectations are raised—but now Jesus tells them that “no prophet is accepted in their hometown”? Jesus angers the crowd & is driven to a cliff & probable death. What does it mean for this hometown boy to create a holy disturbance? God's vision is certainly a challenge, & now Jesus, with the words of the prophets, is unleashing a disturbance in the domestic, tamed, controlled ways of the world & its powers. Jeremiah recognizes the challenge of speaking a prophetic word & questions whether he is too young. Jesus steps into his role & finds challenge among his home community & those who have known him his whole life. Today, echoing Jeremiah we sense a call or mission, even in the midst of dangers or among those who would do harm. Jesus & Jeremiah become key illustrations & open conversation of how we are formed, equipped, & called to live God's agape love, even when surrounded by challenges, obstacles, or hostility. Where is God calling us? How must we confront our own or the community's barriers? What prophetic word are we being called to speak that might cause a holy disturbance?

Illustration

Cliffs are such evocative images: The “Cliffs of Dover.” The idea that someone is “driving you off a cliff.” Who are the people who are on the cliffs of society, pushed to such precarious circumstances through policies & prejudice? How is Jesus, pushed to the edge of a cliff by a crowd of angry people, standing with those driven to the margins of our world?

Theological Reflection

Last Sunday Jesus announced what some theologians call his “purpose statement” in reading the prophet Isaiah. Purpose statements are brief, memorable explanations that unpack why an organization exists. Some experts argue that there is good reason for all individuals to have a personal purpose statement. How does your “purpose statement” align with Jesus' expressed statement from last Sunday? What does it mean to have those gathered around Jesus want to drive him off a cliff when he

suggests that he embodies the values the prophet Isaiah pronounces? Do our personal purpose statements stir such emotion? Do the purpose statements of our faith communities (if we have such statements) stir in such a way?

Pop Culture

Jeremiah & Luke both talk about identity. In Jeremiah we have the prophet proclaiming that God knew him in his mother's womb. In Luke people are asking, "Is not this Joseph's son?" In a social-media world, invite the community to reflect on what it means to be known. Invite scrutiny on the ways our social-media feeds project an airbrushed perception of our lives. How does this contrast with how God knows us intimately & truthfully.

Theological Reflection

"But the truth is . . ." (Luke 4:25) is a line that echoes in these days when many claim we live in a "post-truth" world. How do we talk about truth as a community of faith when so much of the world holds that word as being empty & untrustworthy? What makes Jesus' claim of truth different than the claims we hear in the media, on our online platforms, & on the opinion page of our neighborhood web forum? Is it different at all, or rather the perfection of "truth?" The scriptures invite us to wrestle with this word, a word we will hear repeated in a few months when Pontius Pilate ponders on that fateful night of trial, "What is truth?" (John 18:38).

Illustration

The crowd wants to push Jesus away, but in his words & deeds Jesus is inviting the people, us, to grow up. He pushes us toward a divine way of being in the world. The world is pushed forward all the time: by the voices of the oppressed, by the testimony of those who demand justice, by personal experiences that move us from a place of ignorance to a place of acceptance. In Jesus, God is propelling the people forward, just as much as the people (us?) are pushing against it, because physical, mental, & emotional change is difficult. How is God pushing your assembly, your ministries, you, into a new way of being?

Let the Children Come....It is scary to be a kid & be asked to do something that is beyond your skill, capacity, or developmental stage, maybe even something a kid shouldn't be asked to do (Jer. 1:4-10). Lots of kids have experience with being

expected to take on responsibility & maturity beyond what is appropriate for their age. Instead of focusing on how kids can do a lot more than adults think they can, focus conversations with children today on how God (& the church) won't let you face the hard things in life alone. God will be with you, & God will send helpers.

Luke 4:21-30

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth, Luke stresses Jesus' dual focus: while teaching in a synagogue, he speaks of God's historic care for non-Jews. Jesus compares himself with 2 of the central prophets & miracle-workers of Jewish tradition, Elijah & Elisha, who functioned during the reigns of lesser kings of Judah & Israel. The identification of Jesus as "Joseph's son" suggests that during Jesus' lifetime, no story of an extraordinary birth circulated. The attempt at assassination foreshadows Jesus' execution. So, to summarize the excerpt: between his birth & his death, Jesus embodies God's care for all people. Continuing from last week's gospel, today's gospel repeats its last verse, thus epitomizing the semicontinuous reading of Luke we now undertake. Whether we identify with the Jews worshiping faithfully in the synagogue or with the outsiders in Phoenicia or Syria, Christ comes to be our loving Savior, our liberator, our healer. Like the widow, we are fed, & like Naaman, we are cleansed in the water. At Nazareth, Jesus attends the synagogue service on the sabbath. He has just read some verses from Isaiah. He now tells worshippers that he fulfills them: he is the expected messiah; he will rescue all those who are in need; God's promises made to Israel are "fulfilled" in the new age. All are "amazed" (v. [22](#)), they *keep wondering*: at (as a scholar puts it) Jesus' *words of grace*, of God's freely given gift of love. An Old Testament usage suggests the "words" are the word of God. Probably vv. [22ff](#) describe a subsequent visit to the synagogue. Isn't this the person we have known since he was a child? In v. [23](#), as often in Luke, Jesus takes the offensive: people want him to perform miraculous deeds to satisfy their curiosity, & for their benefit. In vv. [25-27](#), Jesus reminds them of instances where God has helped foreigners (both women & men) rather than Israelites. (In 1 Kings [17-18](#), a "famine", attributed to God cutting off Israel, lasts 3 years; in contemporary books about the end times, the period of persecution & disgrace lasts three & a half years.) The people are "filled with rage" (v. [28](#)) because they begin to realize that Jesus is for others as well as for them. Nazareth, being on a hillside, has steep slopes down which a person might fall to his death. Jesus escapes the *lynch mob*: they let him go because they think he might just be the messiah. He continues his mission in accord with God's plan.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

In the late 600s BCE, King Josiah guided the people back to godliness by removing all traces of foreign worship & by making Jerusalem the one place of worship. Jeremiah played a key role in Josiah's reforms. Jeremiah's career as preacher/writer took place about 626–586 bce. Accounts of his adventures & sermons, along with other matl in chapters 46–52, were compiled afterward, largely by his secretary Baruch. Jeremiah railed against the people's unfaithfulness during a period of excessive social & political unrest, & he assured them of God's coming judgment. The call of a mere boy fits with the recurrent biblical theme of God's attention to the lowliest. The call of Jeremiah is set next to the reading in Lk 4 to intensify the identification of Jesus w/ the tradition of prophets. Christians have appreciated this particular call narrative as an indication of God's attention to even children. All the baptized are called to speak the things of God to others. "The word of the Lord" is a characteristic expression in this book: the message Jeremiah proclaims is God's word. The Hebrew word *yashar*, translated "formed" (v. [5](#)), is a technical term for *created*; a potter *forms* clay into pottery. Recall Genesis [2:7-8](#), where God *forms* man. The idea that God himself forms a child in its mother's "womb" (v. [5](#)) was accepted. God has known Jeremiah since his first moment of existence – both intellectually & in his capacity for action. Even before that, God dedicated him, separated him for his purposes ("consecrated"), to serve him. Jeremiah is but a youth ("boy", v. [6](#) – probably in his early twenties), without experience & authority, but God will give him all necessary support. (Moses' reaction to God's command to lead the people of Israel was similar.) God commissions Jeremiah through the symbolic action of touching his mouth (v. [9](#)). In vv. [5](#) & [10](#), the "nations" & "kingdoms" are most likely Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt & Judah: the history of Israel is intertwined with that of the whole Near East. Jeremiah's mission is to do away with corruption & ungodliness, & to promote ethical conduct & godliness. God's instructions to the prophet continue in v. [17](#). Jeremiah is to be ready for action ("gird up your loins"); he is to respond promptly to God's commands. Mighty as the ungodly are, he is not to flinch, but to "stand up" to them; if he fails to do so, God will "break" him. Even though the deviants will fight against him & persecute him, he will prevail, "for I am with you ... to deliver you" (v. [19](#)).

Images in the Readings

Not only in the 7th century bce, but still today people hope for a **prophet**, someone who will speak truth, whose words can conquer evil by the very power of divine authority. We see this archetypal hope for example in films when magical words spoken by the good guys are able to obliterate what is wicked & hateful. In the Bible, a prophet is not primarily a seer who foretells the future, but someone who is inspired to distinguish

truth from falsehood & who speaks honestly about the outcomes of ignoring such a word of God. Over the centuries it remains true that most prophets are ignored by most people. The gospel includes 2 common biblical images of human need: the **widow** & the **leper**. Both were persons in some ways excluded from the wider society.

Life on the Earth

Luke's reading refers to an idea important in biblical monotheism: if there is only one divine power, then it must be God who causes earth's catastrophes such as famines, & these in order to punish disobedient people. Many Christians are uneasy about assigning earth's disasters to direct intervention from an angry God, yet global climate change, with increasing times of famine, can be thought of as following upon unchecked societal disregard of God's creation.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

Religion can be like a hometown: familiar, traditional, unchanging, a constant in a chaotic, fast-loving world. We want religion to stay the same, to look as it looked when we were children. We want to sing hymns with tunes we know: this is the faith of our childhood. We can wrap religion around us like a homemade quilt, assured that God is in heaven & all's right with the world. . . But Jesus had stripped away their quilt. The boundaries around the chosen people would be broken down. & now Jesus comes into our streets, into our sanctuary, saying that the prophet's words are now fulfilled. All sorts of people we'd never invite to dinner are being welcomed to the table, to break bread & drink wine. But, if we stay, on odd thing happens: we feel the quilt grow larger. Still around us, it is also around the one we named outcast. It's not quite the same hometown, but it's a lot more like the dominion of God.—*Barbara Lundblad*
[from *Homilies for the Christian People*, pp. 403-406.]