

Bible Study
Epiphany 4, Year C
January 31, 2016

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

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah lived in a time of widespread fear, confusion, dread, and denial. The people of Judea were caught in the middle of three encroaching foreign powers – Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. Most of the northern kingdom of Israel had already been conquered, and the territory around Jerusalem was under occupation. Jeremiah saw his beloved Temple and city destroyed, and its people marched away in captivity. Who *would* welcome God’s call to be a prophet in a time and place like that? In the pattern we can read in the call of other prophets, Jeremiah first responds by protesting that he can’t do the job. And in the pattern we have learned to expect from God, the Lord replies, in effect, “Nonsense. I will give you everything you need. Here are your instructions.” God does indeed ask us to do difficult or frightening things sometimes. God appoints Jeremiah “to pluck up...pull down...destroy...overthrow” but also “to build and to plant.” We may be tempted to forget in anxious times that God never leaves us to cope with our disasters alone, but leads us eventually into comfort, restoration, and new growth.

- What things are you feeling prophetic about?
- Can you see the promise of new things as well as the dangers that threaten?

Psalm 71:1-6

This psalm continues the theme of a threatening danger, in the words of a fervent prayer for protection and deliverance. The wicked, the evildoer, and the oppressor named in verse 4 may be political overlords, but they may also be personal adversaries. In either case, we are hearing the plea of someone who feels cornered and outnumbered. The psalmist goes beyond crying out for help, though. Even in this short excerpt (the psalm in its entirety is twenty-four verses long), the speaker turns to professions of confidence and praise. We are reminded that the Israelites had a familial sense of intimacy with the Lord. They sought God’s comfort and protection, they sang and danced and shouted their praise and worship. And when they felt it necessary, they shouted angrily or wailed their laments to the God who led and sustained them. Psalm 71 expresses some of that intimacy – “from my mother’s womb you have been my strength” – and later, in verse 18, “And now that I am old and gray-headed, O God, do not forsake me.”

- What are the deepest longings of your heart?
- Can you pour them out to God?
- What about your disappointments and resentments?
- Can you trust God with those, too?

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Many people may have heard this passage read at weddings and reached the understandable conclusion that Paul’s words apply to individuals in a committed relationship. “Love is patient; love is kind...It does not insist on its own way...” Yes, these statements could certainly apply to the ideal relationship between partners in marriage. We need to read Chapter 13 in its wider context, though, to understand Paul’s message fully. Leading up to this chapter, Paul has pointed out that the members of the church in Corinth are not acting very charitably toward one another,

and are in fact continuing to live according to the social class system of their secular surroundings. Rather than approaching the Lord's Supper in a spirit of unity and love, they have fallen into factions of "haves" and "have-nots." (1 Cor 11:20-22) Rather than using their spiritual gifts for the growth and benefit of all, they appear to have created a hierarchy of "bragging rights" according to who can exercise which gift. (1 Cor 12) Paul's purpose in Chapter 13 is to remind them that they are no longer to act as individuals, thinking of themselves first, but to recognize that they are now part of the body of Christ. In the unity of that body, all are to be treated with equal respect and the gifts of all are to be received in love and gratitude.

- Re-read verses 4-7, applying the words to a modern congregation rather than to an individual couple. What lessons for our mutual life do you find there?
- How many ways could you apply Paul's comparison between childish and adult understanding? It is bad or wrong to be "childish," or simply a form of behavior that should be "put away" as we grow more mature as disciples?

Luke 4:21-30

Luke's telling of this episode differs significantly from Mark's (6:1-6) and Matthew's (13:54-58) versions. And Luke has shifted the focus. In this longer narrative, Jesus elaborates on the theme of the prophet being without honor in his own country, or hometown. In this story, the people of Nazareth do not react angrily to Jesus's saying "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Yes, they are astonished to hear the carpenter's son sounding so authoritative and wise, but their first reaction is very favorable. They only become angry after Jesus reminds them of the times when Israel has rejected her prophets, prompting God to send them to Gentiles instead. What is Luke's purpose in choosing this narrative? Overall, the Gospel of Luke has a distinct tone of justice for the oppressed and the outcast; perhaps this episode can teach us something from that angle. The people of Nazareth are feeling pretty smug over having such an impressive "hometown boy." They don't even seem to mind that he has just claimed to be the Messiah. But the outrage is that he suggests that he is not their exclusive property! That they might not even be given any special favors in the kingdom of heaven because they "knew him when!"

- Are we inclined to think we have a special claim to Jesus?
- Do we secretly resent or disdain the expressions of Christianity that come from other cultures?

Written by Jennifer Shadle

Jennifer Shadle is a transitional Deacon and a candidate for Holy Orders in the Diocese of Colorado. Before recognizing the call to ordained ministry, Jennifer taught vocal music and music history at the secondary and collegiate levels, most recently at Colorado State University-Pueblo. As a seminarian, she takes delight in the liturgy and worship of the Church, theology, and pastoral ministry. She is completing a Concentration in Hispanic Church Studies, and hopes to serve in a multicultural parish setting or to develop a missional ministry among immigrant populations.

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