

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

by Rev. Emily Chapman

January 31, 2010

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts:

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

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 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.”

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, and 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 his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰See, 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.”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see

face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Luke 4:21-30

²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But 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; 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, and 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 him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

I loved to read when I was a little girl. On cold weekends like this, when we couldn’t play outside, I could get through at least one whole book, maybe more. I devoured them, and it worked to my favor that my parents were teachers, and books were the one thing we could nearly always get them to buy for us whenever we wanted. When the movie *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* came out, the first of *Chronicles of Narnia* books by CS Lewis, I knew it couldn’t possibly live up to the way I imagined it when I read it for the first time, after my third-grade teacher introduced them to me. If you haven’t read the books or seen the movie, the story is about three

children who go exploring in an old wardrobe and discover the secret entry into the land of Narnia. This new secret world holds many adventures for the children, and along the way they meet a lion named Aslan. Aslan is the Christ figure in the story and is the King of Narnia. Of course, even as small children we learn that lions are ferocious animals to be feared. But they are intrigued by this lion, and they ask about him. They ask “Is he safe?” The reply they get is not, “Oh yes, he is very safe, don’t worry about him, you’ll be fine.” The answer is instead “NO, he is not safe. But he is good, and he is King.”

I don’t think my third-grade imagination could quite grasp the deep theological understanding of life as God’s people that Lewis is offering here – a life that while not always safe or comfortable, offers goodness and peace that the world desperately needs. Just look at the stories from scripture today – all terribly unsettling words from scripture. It’s Jesus’ very first sermon. And he is already in trouble for speaking the gospel to people who did not want to hear it, and certainly not from him. After all, the message that Jesus brings good news to the poor, the captive, and the oppressed is not so good if you are the rich, the captor, or the oppressor. This sermon that begins in Nazareth and ends at Golgatha, with Jesus paying the price for bringing the Good News to those who were just not ready for such upheaval, who wanted to stick with what was safe, with business as usual.

Surely you have all heard our Epistle lesson before. We think of our reading from 1 Corinthians so sentimentally. It is read more at weddings than anywhere else. But the truth is, there is not much sweet or sentimental about it. Paul is writing to the Corinthians who are notoriously gluttonous, promiscuous, violent, conniving. Everything he says that love is, is what they are not. Everything he says love is not, is what they are. His words are as much accusation as poetry. He pays dearly for his harsh words to them – remember Paul winds up beaten and imprisoned and finally executed. What he did was not safe. But he was transformed by the message of the Gospel that is not for the faint of heart.

And Jeremiah! Poor, young, naive, Jeremiah – how I feel his pain sometimes. He knew to be afraid of following the call from God, but could not possibly now all

that it would cost him. He does the same thing as everyone, including us, does when called by God. Makes excuses. Tells God to find someone else. Jeremiah lives in a time not so unlike our own, at least in our part of the world. Things are generally prosperous. Rather than relying on God, they trust in their own wisdom, knowing that they can save themselves from anything that comes their way....and for the most part they are reasonably certain that nothing bad can happen to them. So of course, Jeremiah is called to prophesy the destruction of Israel, something the people cannot even imagine. Like Jesus, his message of repentance and return to God to a people who are perfectly comfortable in their ways doesn't make him a popular guy.

All of these prophets and saints of God's people, even Jesus himself, paid dearly for their commitment but were willing to be dragged to the edge of a cliff or to the jail if it meant being faithful to their calling. They did things that were not safe, spent time with people they would have thought were not safe. They said things that one doesn't say in polite company. Jeremiah's call from God changed him. Paul's encounter and conversion changed him. Both were so stunned by the strong presence of God in the world that everything about them was different – their lives and vocations were transformed by the experience. It would be easy for us to think that these are other people's experiences, that everyday people in our day do not undergo such dramatic callings. While we might not feel God touch our mouths or be called to preach the destruction of a city, we are all called by God for something. We all have the power to see the presence of God at work and to be transformed by it. And chances are, if we are really faithful to that calling, our lives will be drastically altered. In fact, whether we know it or not, we have already been transformed. In our baptism, we are given new identity in Jesus Christ, just as Jeremiah was given a new vocation when God came to him. Our baptism calls us to live out a new way of life in the world, that may not always be safe and comfortable, that may call us to do something drastic, to make a radical change in the way we live.

Bishop Willimon from North Alabama tells a story from his days working with undergraduate students at Duke University. It seems he got a rather irate phone call from the mother of one of his students. She was terribly upset. It seems she sent her

daughter to Duke to become a lawyer or a CEO, to be wise and cunning in the ways of the world. Now, she has gotten involved with this campus ministry program, and she doesn't seem interested in the things her parents want her to be interested in. And she is talking about going overseas and teaching in dangerous places where her parents do not want her to go. She was irate with Bishop Will for letting her just fly off the deep end and do such foolish things. After several minutes of ranting, she stops, and Bishop Will, being the wise man that he is, responded only with "Well, you're the one who had her baptized. If you want her to be safe and be in control, you should have never gotten her involved with Jesus." This 19-year-old student joined the ranks of Paul and Jeremiah, as those who saw the Living God at work and had join in the mission, even if it meant angering and alienating her own family.

He's not safe, but he is good, says the story. Throughout history God has made people do crazy things, moved them to take big risks for the sake of the mission of God's people in the world. We live in a world that is still filled with the poor, the captive and the oppressed and our stories today call us to break those vicious cycles in whatever ways we can — a task that may at times seem overwhelming. After all the perfect love Paul describes is not easy — and the dangerous but life-giving words of Jeremiah are a challenge to us who are comfortable where we are. So how do we begin again to live boldly into God's mission?

Perhaps we follow the lead of characters in our stories today — with readiness to meet God in the world broken though it may be, to be transformed by the encounter and empowered to take part in God's mission to which every one of us is called. And though Jesus may not be safe, may not keep us in our comfort zone, God has promised to be with us always, even now, in our time that surely calls for the kind of boldness that we hear in our stories today, for people who are willing to take big risks:

maybe it's befriending one of our neighbors who comes to the Emergency Aid Coalition,

maybe it is overcoming fear to talk about your faith openly,

maybe it's consuming fewer products made on the backs of the poor, the captive, and the oppressed.

Whatever it is, we can all be reminded by our stories this morning that though the calling may be difficult, the One who calls us is good, and is King over all things, and offers us endless hope for the journey and the promise of life eternal.