

Getting Started

Luke 4:21-30

Crossroads Christian Church

Jeremiah 1:4-10

January 31, 2016 Epiphany 4C

Almost every minister has memories of the first time he or she preached their very first sermon. I'm sure that it's true for lay people who have preached, as well. At best, you'll get through it, and people will be nice and say what a wonderful job you just did, even though you know better. At worst, you hope they won't throw hymnals at you.

My first time was in Albia, Iowa, the summer before I started college to prepare for the ministry. The pastor who had encouraged me to go into ministry was on vacation, and I was the fill-in. I sort-of remembered the sermon and how it started, because I told of an experience from my childhood. I was 11, and was hanging with my friend Gary who was collecting on his paper route. We stopped at a Baptist parsonage, and the minister looked at us and said, "Have you thought about becoming ministers?" Since I had seldom attended church at that point, it wasn't something that I had ever considered. It wasn't a call, but it did plant a seed. And that seed was nurtured and watered in that church in Albia, and eventually grew into a call. Before I went out to tell that story, though, wearing a grey suit and a skinny tie, the organist and I were waiting to go in, and she flipped the switch on the new carillon in order to be able to play the chimes to tell that worship was starting. She set something else off, though—the funeral toll. It started bonging slowly, solemnly, through the sanctuary, and for all I know out through the speakers on the steeple and into the community. Bong. Bong. She didn't know how to shut it off. Bong. Bong. I didn't know how to shut it off. Bong. Bong. Finally, I think that she unplugged the whole infernal contraption. I had been afraid that my sermon would be kind of dead, but that was ridiculous!

Today, in our scripture readings, we had two stories about getting started on preaching God's word, both of which are so profound, they make my story look silly and frivolous. But it's when we weave the Bible stories with our own faith stories that new designs emerge.

Jeremiah was sometimes called the weeping prophet, because his message was a tragic one, and he felt deeply the pain of what was to become of God's people in Judah. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, had already been conquered and assimilated by Nineveh. Now a new world power, Babylonia, was the big threat. But Jeremiah knew that the real issue was not politics, the real issue was not armies. Instead, the real issue was faithlessness. God had called the people to be faithful to the Covenant; to worship the one true God faithfully, and to live lives of justice and peace. Instead, the whole society was idolatrous and corrupt, with those in power grabbing what they could from those with less. It was only a matter of time before the other shoe fell. Someone said that the call of prophets is to speak truth to power, and it's often a truth that power doesn't want to hear.

Our passage for today shows Jeremiah wrestling with that call. His story of call parallels the story of Moses's call many centuries earlier. God calls and the callee says, basically, "who me? You've got to be kidding." Moses said, "But I don't speak well." Jeremiah said, "But I am only a youth." Yet Jeremiah knew deep within his heart that God had called him before he was even born. Jeremiah knew, like Moses and Isaiah had known, like Jesus would later know, that the way wouldn't be easy; that people would resist; that truth was the last thing that entrenched power wanted to hear.

Our Gospel lesson begins where it ended last week, as a continuation of the story about Jesus preaching at old First Church in Nazareth. Last week, we heard how everybody was impressed. But Jesus challenges his listeners, and so the story ends in shadow, a sense of foreboding, a sense of the cross that would later come. His sermon back in his old home town of Nazareth set the tone for his whole ministry to come, like a president giving an inaugural address. It may not have been the very first sermon that he preached, but it was the one that defined who he was and what his mission would be. The people sat in anticipation as this hometown boy came back to worship in the synagogue, and as he accepted an invitation to preach. What would he say? Why was this carpenter's son, whom they had watched growing up, going around and doing and saying such astounding things? Jesus stood up, and was handed the scroll that contained the message of the prophet Isaiah. He turned to the part he wanted—the part that we call Isaiah 61. The Message translates it this way: "God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!" (unquote) Carefully, Jesus rolled up the scroll and handed it to the attendant, and sat down—a rabbi would sit when he was going to teach officially. What would he say? "Today, right here, right now, this scripture has been fulfilled." Today. Here. Now.

People were impressed. Wow. People were astonished. Huh? And some people started questioning. "Where is he getting all this stuff? He's just one of us, the carpenter's kid. Does he think that he's some big shot? Who does he think he is? He can impress those gullible people in Capernaum, but we know better."

Jesus answered. He said that a prophet was without honor, was unwelcome, in his hometown. It's like saying that you can't be an expert on something unless your fifty miles from where anybody knows you. But Jesus was just getting warmed up. He went on to tell them that God's grace wasn't confined to the city limits of Nazareth, or to Galilee, or to Israel. During a famine many years before, when there were many starving widows in Israel, hadn't Elijah helped only a widow in Sidon? And when there were many lepers in Israel, hadn't Elisha only cleansed a Syrian general?"

Now Jesus lost his audience. Why? Maybe partly because they thought he was putting on airs, pretending to be a prophet, pretending to be the agent for God's good news. Part of it was religious prejudice. Jesus had been preaching in Capernaum, which had a heavily non-Jewish population. When he pointed out

that God's grace and mercy and good news extended to all, he wasn't in violation of Jewish teaching, but he was in violation of their understanding of it. He was challenging their prejudices. He was saying that their concept of God was too small.

Their response was to try and take him outside and throw him down upon the rocks at the bottom of the hill behind the synagogue. Jesus slipped away, but it still shows us that from the very beginning of his ministry there was conflict, misunderstanding. The good news that Jesus preached seemed to be bad news to those who heard.

Jesus was called to preach good news that would bring good news to the poor and needy; sight to those who couldn't see; release from those who were locked up in prison; freedom to those burdened and oppressed. And because of his ministry, because of his willingness to go to the mat, no, to go to the cross, on behalf of those who suffer, Jesus brought good news indeed. Many have been transformed, many have been liberated, many have received new life and new health because Jesus was true to his mission and many of those who followed him stayed true as well.

When Jesus quoted Isaiah, it wasn't just the text for worship that day; rather, it was his mission statement. His life and his death would later be wrapped around bringing that text to life in words and deeds.

And that's what Jesus was about—good news; release; recovery; freedom; and proclaiming a new age of God's love.

This love of God as revealed through Jesus Christ, this love of neighbor, is central to all of Christianity, that's why we call it the Great Commandment. It, and the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, summarizes all the law and the prophets.

The world is still needy. Billions are impoverished. Others are prisoners of oppression, blinded by ideology, and starving either for physical nourishment or for love and meaning. We're not all called to be preachers. God has called some of us to teach, some of us to administer, some of us to help others through practical efforts, some in working in health care, some in protecting and defending others, some in quiet neighborliness. Jesus was true to his calling. Let us be true to ours. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon