

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Revised Common Lectionary – Year C
Annual Meeting
January 31, 2010
St. James' Episcopal Church, Pullman WA

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

Something amazing happened here this week. Many of you were here, so you know what I mean. Wednesday evening there was a training of the people who are currently or intend to become readers. After a tasty meal and some introductory remarks about making introductory remarks, we moved into the sanctuary to practice reading at the ambo. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen times, maybe more, we heard the same passage of scripture read over and over again – the one you all heard first this morning, the call of Jeremiah. Young and old, teenagers, men and women, loud, soft, dramatic, restrained. Each voice layered upon the next, layering an extraordinary fabric of sound, as each person concluded, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.” Then at the end, in an experiment that soon took off beyond my own hopes, I asked Doug Adams to read the passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, knowing that even without practicing he would be able to read it at sight. What I hadn't counted on was that, without practice, Doug was not able to distance himself from the power of the words. He was quite visibly moved by the time he concluded, struggling to finish the final words. In the meantime, I had asked Todd Butler to step up and read the same passage as if he were irked with the Corinthians. And he did a great job, nagging the Corinthians, fiercely accusing them of all the things that love is not, that love never does. But even Todd ran up against the power of the word, and the confrontational tone subsided. At last, he, too, had to read the final passage calmly, tenderly, with hope and promise of abiding love. Nancy Collins-Warner stepped up spontaneously after that, offering a woman's voice as a balance. A voice that also contained some of the confrontational nuance of Paul's words, but one that dropped soothing tones over the whole ensemble, the voice of love.

Well, we probably could have gone on for hours. Some of us, at least. But the choir needed to practice, and we had promised to let people go home. I know that many of you that talked with me about this were just amazed and overwhelmed by the beauty of that experience. It left me wondering how I could ever say much more today. We were confronted by the words of scripture in that multi-textured reading in ways that went beyond words. In ways that, as Paul might say, can only be described enigmatically, in a dim mirror. We heard, perhaps, the power that accompanied the scripture reading that day the synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus came home, unrolled the scroll of Isaiah, and made the words leap off the page. Today in your hearing, he says, these words have been fulfilled.

This story is told in all three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Matthew and Mark, the reaction of the hometown folks is one of surprise that someone they recognize, one of the hometown kids, would have anything authoritative to say. Jesus is unable to perform deeds of power in Nazareth because they just can't quit remembering how cute he was when he was a toddler. In Luke's telling of the story, however, the hometown crowd's reaction moves from proud amazement and surprise to out and out rage – provoked by Jesus' comments. So he comes off more like the Jesus we meet in John's Gospel, who starts out his public ministry by knocking over the tables of the money-changers in the temple in Jerusalem. This is a Jesus who is not content to be undermined by the expectations of his hometown friends and family, this is a Jesus who will proclaim that he has come to bring a sword to rip apart the expectations and relationships that bind us into our communities.

Today, the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing exactly because Jesus came to show us how God's kingdom can break into our lives and change our hearts.. Jesus came to show us the truth of God's promises, the promises first uttered to a people whose faith had grown faint in the exile years, the promises that God continues to proclaim in our hearing. This is what God wants here, today –

justice, care for the poor, freedom for the captive, clearing of debts – the year of Jubilee. And yet when Jesus proclaims this good news, it doesn't comfort. It doesn't comfort because it means that we have to move out of our comfort zones. It doesn't comfort because it means that each one of us here must admit that we have more than we need; and because we must acknowledge that our collective having of more than we need makes others desperately poor. It grates because, in the language of the popes, Jesus proclaims a gospel with a preferential option for the poor. And it isn't us. Not until our hearts are broken, and the kingdom of God flows in and through us.

What an interesting way to embark on our annual meeting. We sat in Bible Study the other night trying to imagine what might make a congregation of Episcopalians run any preacher over a cliff. We're pretty tolerant folks, even when the preacher goes on too long, or talks about uncomfortable or boring topics, or even when the preacher talks too much about scripture, or not enough about scripture; when the preacher talks too much about politics or too little about politics. We know it will be over sooner or later. And whatever ruffling or discomfort may arise will be soothed over by habit and the power of our fellowship.

We do indeed have a broad and deep tradition of fellowship in this church, a commitment to our traditions, and to one another, that has sustained this community of faith for close to 120 years, first as St. Katherine's, and then as St. James'. That community is valuable, a source of spiritual grounding and transformation. And yet that can be the very thing that makes us unwilling to perform any deeds of power here. Not the sort of miracles or ecstatic worship that the people of Corinth boasted about as their stock in trade. But the power to proclaim our faith boldly in all that we do, the power to live every minute of our lives as if we really believed the words we proclaim in our worship. To be willing to be uncomfortable for the sake of the mission of God's reconciling love as known to us in Jesus Christ. To be loving witnesses of the call we have each received, to tear down as well as to plant.

We will continue to hear from our national church a call to respond in love and generosity to those in Haiti who are struggling to survive after the earthquake. As a million people wait for temporary shelter, the rainy season is not far off, when floods will devastate those same hillsides. The organizations we have commended for your support, Episcopal Relief and Development; Rotary International's Shelter Box program; Partners in Health – these are all agencies that have long been in place, that have connections with the people already there, and are supporting the ongoing efforts of those who have devoted their lives to raising up the downtrodden. In the midst of that devastation we hear of the powerful faith of the Haitian people, who have known poverty for over 200 years, but who know too the power of living in the hands of God. We will continue to draw our hearts to Haiti, even as we hold one another in hope and faith, as we gather together each Sunday to draw again from the deep waters of our faith, from the source of all our deeds of power, the one living God whom we know in Jesus.

Throughout the season of Lent, starting in mid-February, we will be invited to offer a weekly meal offering – a simple supper of beans and rice that would replace the meal we might otherwise provide, and a cash gift to replace that more extravagant meal. The money may not be huge – I know people in this congregation for whom a meal of beans and rice might from time to time exceed the food they might normally have for dinner – but we will be invited into this weekly opportunity to eat in solidarity with our sisters and brothers so that when the cameras have gone away, we will still be with the least of these.

In the season after the Epiphany, we have what the author Nora Gallagher calls, “the season of the weird.” Nothing is the way it's supposed to be. A homeless couple gives birth to a baby; astrologers come and bring costly gifts. The wine runs out at the wedding; Jesus replenishes the supply from water. Jesus steps out of the baptismal water of repentance; the heavens open and God proclaims, “This is my Son.” We're so used to these stories year after year, we don't hear how unusual they are, how much they stretch us beyond the norm of expectation. Pulled out of our safe spaces, we become mindful, we begin to see who Jesus is; and at the same time who we are called to be. We are pulled in Epiphany

season into that thin space between the world of the divine and the world we see around us, until on the last Sunday after Epiphany, the thin space is so thin, we see Jesus face to face, unveiled for who he is.

Paul has invited the Christians in Corinth to step beyond their normal ways of behavior. Instead of seeing one another as belonging to one faction or another of the institutional church – already!— Paul has invited them to imagine themselves as making up the whole body of Christ on earth. That we as a body, bound through abiding and sacrificial love into a communion of faith, we are now making our journey to the mountain top, where we will be revealed for who we are, stripped of the foolish masks of pretense, of conformity, of status. And on that mountain top, Paul proclaims, we will be known as we are known, and see God, the one who loved us first, face to face. For all the things of this world will pass away. And prophecy will pass away. But the steadfast love of the Lord does not fade. It is that love that abides.

Today as we move into our annual meeting we look at the ways in which we work together as part of the whole body of Christ, animated by that love and formed here to be agents in the world of God's reconciling love. We have a formal structure that allows us to survive as a community of faith – that sees to it that bills get paid, that the lights are on in this building when you come to worship, that there is worship here at all. We will be electing new members to our vestry – but first we will say goodbye to those whose terms expire:

Stephan Flores, who has served a three-year term, and for two years has served as Clerk of the Vestry, as well as master outfielder on the Episcobats. Stephan would sometimes drive in half-way from Moscow in the midst of a snowstorm before wisdom forced him to turn around. The member with the longest commute and perhaps the most demanding life at home and at work, Stephan has been a faithful scribe, often challenging us to debate and holding us to fiscal accountability. John Brewer, who co-chaired the stewardship team this year, and whose connection with the worship ministry team compelled him to undertake an ongoing study of liturgy offered by Fr. John Grabner. Sara Schofield, who has served as liaison with the Social Justice Outreach Ministry team, as well as a member of the parish audit team; and who has conscientiously lined up members of the vestry to count the weekly offerings and prepare them for the assistant treasurer's accounting. Sharon Nitz, who two years ago took on the office of Senior Warden, knowing that it would be a very hard time for her and me both; and who agreed to serve an additional year on the vestry, filling an unexpired term, and as Senior Warden, at great emotional cost as she supported me and called me to account in the hard months of my husband's dying.

All of these deserve your grateful recognition, and our gratitude for their years of service.

Continuing on the vestry are Fritz Hughes, who has served as our Junior Warden this year, and who has agreed to serve as Senior Warden; Dianne Lowe, coordinator of our prayer chain, liaison with the hospitality ministry team, and czar of parking; Chris Stone, who was appointed to fill the term vacated by Elsa Kirsten Peters, who resigned for health reasons; Eric Pratt, liaison with the pastoral care ministry team; and Margaret Rehberg, who has been the liaison with the Women of St. James.

Earlier this month we celebrated with prayers of thanksgiving the anniversary of Dean and Catherine Ritchie's traffic accident. In the year of their recovery, Dean has continued to work on the systematic transformation of the administrative and financial procedures of this parish that he undertook when he began serving as our treasurer. We had hoped he could step down this year, but he still has some work to do – and when he is done, it will be easier for future volunteers to say “yes” to the call to serve as treasurer. We thank you Dean. And we do hope to let you go soon.

The band of readers who gathered here this week to read from the prophet Jeremiah are about a third of the people who fill these pews every week. So many of you are involved in the ways that worship comes together, from our musicians, our deacons, our teachers and students, our ushers and greeters, our altar guild and readers, eucharistic ministers, and pastoral caregivers – all of you ministers of the Holy Eucharist, all of you called to this ministry here, all of you called through this ministry to proclaim that love to one another and the world outside these walls.

When we have gone through Lent and come to Easter, I will be leaving on sabbatical. While I am gone, it has been my concern, and the concern of the sabbatical committee that has met with me regularly, to call an interim priest who would care for you, and return to you the love you so generously give each week. After a year and a half of supporting me, we wanted you to be held in loving hands, so it is with tremendous joy that we are able to announce that our rector emeritus, the Rev. Armand Larive, has agreed to serve as your interim priest in April, May and June of this year. He will be here the Sunday after I leave, and will stay at the rectory. For those of you who have come within the past several years, Fr. Armand, "Bunky", was the rector here for 27 years. It is his handiwork you see when you look at the cross, the carvings in this room. And it is his handiwork you see when the faithful people of this parish gather faithfully each week around this table. We will all be blessed to have his nurturing presence here, and I can begin my sabbatical after Easter, knowing that you will be in the very best hands.