



God is in the Midst of Us: Yes or No?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany ~ January 31, 2010

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
'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.'
Then I said, 'Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But 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.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.'
Then 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.
See, 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.'

Luke 4:21-30

Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Most of us spend some time wondering why things happen the way they do. Why this series of hardships right now? Am I being tested, prepared for something? Why this great good fortune, an unforeseen opportunity? Where will this lead? Why has our own family life or the life and structure of our society come to look the way it does? In all of these arenas, private and public, we ask ourselves, what is the meaning of this? Why is this happening? It is important for us to try and make meaning of our lives, try to see that our lives have meaning, are meaningful.

In our task of making meaning, there are two options, at least. One is that God is in the midst of and taking an active role in life, our life and public life. The other is that God is not, not active. A simple distinction. Either God is or is not with us. I suspect that many of us would claim the former and live by the latter. We may claim that we believe God is present and active, but do we live accordingly? *IF* we believe that God is on the move, and we have any sense of God's creative power, then our lives will be marked by an awareness that God can and, in all likelihood, will bring newness to situations in ways that we cannot now perceive. Do we live with that sense of God's newness, God creating new life, *ex nihilo*, out of nothing? And *IF* we believe that God is going to bring newness, are we prepared to make room, to let go the old?

These questions confront us in the person and prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, and in the person of Jesus Christ, particularly in the lessons for this day.

Before I get to Jeremiah and Jesus, some personal context. There are times I become acutely aware of some fault or another that I have, prompting me to try and change my ways. Does that ever happen to you? It can be really hard, especially when it's some ingrained pattern or behavior learned and cemented early on in my life. Nonetheless, it is essential for me that I can try to change, that I believe change, however slight, is possible.

I am aware of nothing more crippling than the statement, "you'll never change." To say that to me is to cut me off at the knees, to deny me the prospect of a future which is different from the present. It is bad enough to say that I cannot change myself. But to deny the possibility that God, God will yet work a new thing in me, is to condemn me – or anyone else – to life without hope; to despair – which is death. To preclude the possibility of change and to submit to the way things are is to affirm God is *NOT* with us.

Jeremiah was a prophet and, like most prophets, he was a poet. Poetry is the necessary language of prophets. For prophets are called to speak of that which is not yet. Prophets are called to challenge the existing order of life and to invite their audience to imagine an altogether other order of life. Such invitation to imagination is best, perhaps is only possible, in the language of poetry. Poetry does not describe; it suggests. Poetry does not offer solutions; it raises questions. Prose fills in all the words in-between and is final; poetry hints. Poetry invites and requires the hearer's participation; it is open-ended, unfinished. Thus, poetry is always dangerous. It threatens those invested in having the answers, the control, the power – by its very open-endedness.

Jeremiah was a prophet and a poet who lived between times. Jeremiah's ministry spanned the very painful period when the people of Judah, his people, were taken into exile and eventually returned from exile to begin again. In other words, he lived in a period when the known and trusted structures of society were completely dismantled, people's lives thrown into great turmoil, the city laid waste, and then, in time, the seeds were planted for the creation of a new community.

What happened in Judah during this period can readily be interpreted in secular, socio-economic and political ways. Jeremiah interpreted the situation in theological ways. Jeremiah perceived that what was happening was the result of a God who was dangerously on the move in the midst of a specific social crisis. God was condemning the decayed political structure of Judah, and calling the people to relinquish their hold upon it, so that they might receive from God a new society. Jeremiah's vision, coupled with the courage to articulate it, destined Jeremiah to a life of terrifying freedom and vitality, for he perceived in all things the promise of God's newness.

Our passage this morning is the story of Jeremiah's call. It is not likely to be the record of an even which happened on a given day in the prophet's life; rather, it is a summary and validation of his entire ministry. The heart of Jeremiah's call and ministry is summed up in God's commission of him: "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."

I asked if in order to receive God's newness we are able to let go the old. This was Jeremiah's ministry: to assist the people of Judah in relinquishing their dependence upon a failing society, that they might receive a new one. It is summed up in the verbs of Jeremiah's call: to pluck up and to tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. It's all right there.

As I listened on Wednesday night to President Obama's State of the Union address and to Governor Bob McDonnell's Republican response.... And then again as I listened to the back and forth when the President

joined Republican members of Congress.... I heard some words of new possibility, glimmers of the prospect of change; but I also felt the deep and determined entrenchment of partisan divisions. The President offers words of newness, but will the leaders of either party be able to loosen their grip on their respective patch of political turf in any substantive way?

As for Jeremiah, so for us; we live in a period when many of the known and trusted structures of society no longer function for everyone's benefit, and need dismantling. And we, what shall we make of this? Shall we resign ourselves to the inevitable?

Or can we believe that God is dangerously on the move, that the hand of God is at work even in the midst of our political machinations? Could it be that our calling is to interpret our political situation; that is, to make meaning for ourselves and others, not with a limited view to what *IS*, but with an anticipation that God is working something new? Could it be that it is our task to use the dangerous and free language of a prophet's poetry and suggest that God is plucking up, tearing down, destroying and overthrowing, *so that* God can build and plant? Could it be that God is seeking ways to help us relinquish our dependence on a dried out, bankrupt political structure? *So that* we might receive something new? I am asking nothing more than my initial question: do we believe that God is with us, in the midst of us and active in our life? If we do, how are we to respond and participate in God's activity?

It was this question of God's presence that caused such upheaval when Jesus returned home to Nazareth. When Jesus announced that the scriptures were fulfilled in the people's hearing that day, their initial response was favorable. But Jesus perceived their smug security, their assumption of and dependence upon their being God's chosen, so he provoked them further. By suggesting that a prophet is not accepted in his own land, Jesus indicated that God's liberation is not necessarily coming to those who rely on past promises; rather it is coming to those who will receive it.

Those people said they believed that God is with us, but they did not. This was made plain at a later time when Jesus spoke of destroying the temple and in three days raising it up. He was referring to the temple of Jerusalem and to the temple of his body, his coming crucifixion and resurrection. At home in Nazareth, the people cannot hear of destruction and rebuilding; they cannot relinquish their hold on reality to receive new life from the present God.

If God is with us, then nothing is secure. So they rejected him.

We are the people of God in our generation. Let's not sit this one out. Often those people who speak of the hand of God at work in the midst of political practice put us on guard; too many sound like fundamentalist wing-nuts – perhaps as Jesus did and Jeremiah before him. So, then, shall we abdicate and maintain a safe distance; polite, mute, and rather offended? Just like those in Jesus' home town. Or shall we dare believe that God is with us, working a new thing in our lives? Will you dream? Will you dare to believe that God can change you and me, that God is not finished with us? Will you dare to believe that God cares and is at work even in the morass of American politics at the beginning of the third millennium?

We do not have to know, cannot know, what God has in mind. We can be sure it means that we, as individuals and as a nation, will need to relinquish our hold on treasured habits and attitudes. What lays ahead we need only suggest with the open-endedness of poetry. We need only proclaim that God is able, able to work a new thing; that in Jesus the Christ the Scriptures are fulfilled; that sight is given to the blind; the lame walk, the captive set free. We need proclaim these and trust that it starts with us.

If it is true, it is so scary. I have so far to grow in my own faith and trust in God.

If you and I do not live these dreams for our selves and our society, who will? If not us, who? If not for the Kingdom of God, why? Let's dare the dream; the dream that God is with us, here and now.