

## *God's Difficult Word*

Jeremiah 1: 4-10    Luke 4: 22-30

There is a Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC. I didn't know that. [They had an exhibit of a particular Bible on loan from Fisk University](#). This Bible was published in 1807 and used among the British in their Caribbean colonies, apparently by missionaries working among slaves to encourage their conversion to Christianity. There are only three known copies of this kind of Bible.

It is a fascinating Bible, not because of its rarity or its age. Rather, what makes it so exceptional is what it **doesn't** have. Anything in the Bible which might encourage rebellion or mention liberation has been removed. The assumption is that this was the compromise for the slave-owners to enable the Christian mission among the slaves to proceed.

What happens when you remove all references to rebellion or liberation from the Bible? The curator states that 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament is missing. He put it another way: the standard Protestant Bible has 1,189 chapters, but this slave's Bible has only 232 chapters.

On one hand, it was good for the missionaries to consider the slaves worthy of outreach since slaves were regarded in many social spheres as sub-human, more like animals. (Okay, there are some people who still look at black people that way.) For another positive, the missionaries obviously intended to educate the slaves to be able to read, something typically outlawed in slave-holding states in America.

When we realize how the Bible is utterly gutted after removing any mention of rebellion or liberation, you might regard scripture differently. We may find God's Word to be a source of comfort and consolation, or a source for understanding Jesus and Christian life and values. But we should also recognize that the Bible is a manifesto of liberation and resistance, of confrontation, revolt, and rejection of worldly powers. It is a document of the power of God's people in faithfulness over and against the powers that stand against God and God's people.

Yet when I hear certain Christian preachers and church leaders, it is as if they have utterly gutted scripture of its power to transform and bring new life, reading and reciting only those portions that fit their agenda while ignoring the hard truths standing against their agenda, indeed surrounding their agenda and blowing their agenda up. Just as bad, Christian followers accept their leader's corruptions without questioning what scripture is really saying. As I've said before, the greatest and most insidious modern heresy is the corrupt exploitation of scripture to deny its power to transform and bring new life, to skip over the difficult word of God and accept only the word of God that suits one's purpose.

When our mind and spirit are actually confronted by God's difficult word, we can react in surprising ways that may not make us too proud of ourselves in retrospect.

Suggesting that God's Word is different from your own word is one of those situations that can provoke a hostile response. Yet, provoking is often exactly what God's Word is intended to do.

While there is great joy in serving and ministering in the name of the Lord, there are agonies along the way, sometimes in such a degree that you wonder if you're sane for doing this stuff, if this is really worth it, and if God has lost *his* mind for calling you to do it. Answering the Lord's calling is something done with a bit of fear and trepidation, because the experience of such servants shows what a difficult path it is.

Such thoughts were likely popping into mind when young Jeremiah was confronted by the voice of God. The voice explains how Jeremiah was known to God even before he was born. Remember a few weeks ago how we talked about God's name for us? Listen as God names Jeremiah – *Before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a **prophet to the nations***. That's his name: Prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah thinks this can't be right. God must have made a mistake. Young Jeremiah tries a dodge, wimpering, *Ah, Lord; I do not know how to speak; I am only a child*. God brushes off this hesitation: *Don't say that! **You must go** wherever I send you and **say** what I command you!*

This really sounds like a dangerous calling, and my guess is that Jeremiah is visibly trembling about now. Jeremiah is aware that God often sends his messengers into harm's way, like Moses challenging Pharaoh as one example, or Elijah facing down King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. That's *really* dangerous duty.

As if God knows what Jeremiah is thinking – or God sees him shaking like a leaf, God says: *Do not be afraid **of them**, for I am with you and will rescue you*. Let's turn around what God's saying, kind of a reversal reading: if God says don't fear, then we're talking about something fearful. If God is going to rescue you, then you must be in some mortal danger. How does this calling sound so far? Are you eager to accept?

In Isaiah's calling story, you'll recall his vision in the temple had an angel touching his lips with a burning coal. Here with Jeremiah, **God himself** reaches out his hand and touches Jeremiah's lips, saying, *Now I have put **my** words in your mouth*. At this point, there is no turning back. God's words will come out of your mouth no matter what, and those words are likely to put you in danger.

God then describes the power of God's word. It says: *See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant*. It is not that Jeremiah himself will be doing the toppling of kings and kingdoms, no more than Moses took Pharaoh to the wood shed all by himself. No, it won't be Jeremiah, but God's word has unmistakable power, just as God's mere speaking of words brought about the creation in six days.

This power *and* the difficulty of God's word has been placed in Jeremiah's mouth. And yes, he should fear and look for the rescuing hand of his God. He's going to need it.

While God's word will bring kings to their knees and kingdoms to ruin, in a corresponding way, it will also bear the power of building and planting, of making God's new things happen. We forget that God is always trying to renew and to grow. In order to do that, hardened ground needs plowing, creating furrows where new seed can be planted. There is disturbance and disruption, the loss of the way it's always been, and the way we thought it should remain. God's word breaks through the hardened earth, turning up the crusted clods, and then planting new seeds for new things to happen; destruction and creation go hand-in-hand.

God's word is challenge and confrontation, seeking to pierce the accepted and commonplace, urging disruption and causing discomfort. In the hands of the preacher, from the mouth of the prophet, from the spirit of the good teacher, God's word is unlikely to get a warm, fuzzy response from listeners. Comfort and assurance is a lot more popular than a jolt of contrary ideas and confrontation with uncomfortable truths.

That brings us to Jesus. We pick up just where we left off last Sunday, with Jesus in his hometown synagogue, having taken up the Isaiah scroll that says: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...* Concluding the reading, Jesus says: *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*

This is potent stuff, pretty much proclaiming that he is the Promised One from God, the Chosen One. Presumably he said more than the one sentence since the narrator shares how "amazed" people were at the "gracious words that came from his lips." Someone asks the question – and we don't know the intent really – *Isn't this Joseph's son?* Presumably, there is some marveling in the crowd that a son of a local carpenter, of a hand laborer, a common working stiff, is the Promised One from God. Moreover, this fellow is only notable to these people as "Joseph's son."

We should also realize that they figured his generous words about freedom, sight, release, and favor was their own blessing. 'Great,' they're saying, 'the Messiah is from among us and he will bless us first and foremost.'

Jesus then responds to them: 'You will say to me, 'Physician, heal yourself.' This phrase means to take care of your own. They've likely heard about his blessings in Capernaum and now they want theirs. It's like folks going to Oprah and they want to hear her say, "A car for you, and a car for you, and one for you, everybody gets a free car." And why not? They heard how Oprah gave away cars to her audience at one show; now they want theirs!

It's a small scale version of what Jesus will experience throughout his ministry, people expecting him to be *their* Messiah, not **God's** Messiah, wanting him to serve *them* rather than have him serve God and the Kingdom. Big, big difference.

Jesus has some news about this blessing business for the hometown crowd. Let's take a look at who gets the blessings as Jesus commences teaching them. Consider Elijah who blessed the **non**-Jewish woman from Sidon in Lebanon. Or Elisha, successor

to the great prophet; he healed Naaman the **non**-Jewish Syrian. There were lots of Jews who could have been blessed by Elijah, but God chose a non-Jew. And there were many Jews with leprosy who could have been healed by Elisha, but God chose a non-Jew. So you see, Jesus teaches that God's prophets are not spirit-filled magicians serving the hometown crowd. Those called are servants of God who empowers them, who puts his word in their mouths. Jesus has made it clear that the scope of his mission is for God and God's Kingdom, not for pleasing the home-townies.

We hear how this doesn't go over too well since the home crowd has one of the worst reactions to a sermon ever; they try to throw the preacher – Jesus – off a cliff. That's never happened to me. Then again, I haven't preached near a cliff. Note to self: don't preach near cliffs. (Another footnote: there are no cliffs near Nazareth,) Jesus walks through the crowd to continue his ministry for another 20 chapters. God's word will not be stopped.

When the word is heard, and the word is God's authentic expression, it *can* be difficult and disturbing, precisely because that's just what God intended. To shake up our stale, stifling pattern, to pry open our blind eyes, to break through our clogged ears, and to light a fire under our fat and happy tushies, God's word comes along fully intending to rock our world. When it doesn't rock the boat and shake things up, we have likely bypassed the sharp edge that was there for us, to wake us up and get our attention.

Servants of God are summoned to bring God's word – God's difficult word – to shine a light in the darkness, to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release for the oppressed, and the season of God's favor for those who thought God had forgotten them. This is our shared ministry and our shared calling in service to our Lord Jesus Christ. We shouldn't be surprised when its ideas are difficult. We should be disappointed when they aren't difficult, and then read it again.