

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 30-31, 2010
Luke 4:21-30

“The Call and the Challenge”

When I was ordained into the office of the holy ministry many years ago, a friend from college made this banner as a gift (*show banner*). Over the years, I’ve had it hanging in my study as a reminder to me of God’s call to me to speak his Word. The words on the banner are taken from today’s Old Testament lesson, when the Lord God called Jeremiah to speak his Word: **“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth”** (Jeremiah 4:9). But with that call also comes a challenge, and we see this in the Gospel lesson as Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and after preaching in the synagogue is nearly killed by an angry mob. The challenge is speaking God’s Word to people who may not want to hear it; who may actually resist it and become hostile to it. And yet, by God’s command, that Word must still be proclaimed, whether people welcome it or resist it; whether they receive it with joy or reject it with scorn. So the message for this day is two-fold: the call from God as we see it in Jeremiah and the challenge to speak that Word from God as we see it in Jesus. That is the theme for today’s message, “The Call and the Challenge.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

First, the call: God’s call to Jeremiah reflects a pattern that we see in many others in Scripture who were called by God to go and proclaim his Word. Take out your worship bulletin and turn to the Old Testament lesson so we can look at this verse by verse. There are five distinct elements in this call pattern here: 1) God’s initiative, **“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’”** (Jeremiah 1:4-5). God had a plan and purpose for Jeremiah that predates Jeremiah’s conception in his mother’s womb. 2) Resistance, **“Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy’”** (Jeremiah 1:6). Like others before him, including Moses, Jeremiah didn’t think he was the man for the job. He focuses on his inexperience and his inability to speak. But you see, God does not call the qualified; rather, God qualifies the called. 3) God’s rebuke and reassurance, **“But the Lord God 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’”** (Jeremiah 1:7-8). Jeremiah’s inexperience is irrelevant because God sends him, and his inability to speak is beside the point because God tells him what to say. God doesn’t just rebuke Jeremiah, though, he reassures the young and fearful prophet that he’s not alone; God himself goes with him. 4) Physical act of commissioning, **“Then the Lord God put out his hand and touched my mouth”** (Jeremiah 1:9a). As with Isaiah (whom we’ll hear about next Sunday), God provides a physical sign that encourages the prophet – God’s touch upon his mouth. 5) Content of the commission, **“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”** (Jeremiah 1:9b-10). Notice what the Lord God calls Jeremiah to do: Jeremiah is appointed “over nations and over kingdoms.” This is the second time God told Jeremiah that his ministry was not just to the house of Israel, but to the nations. Already in verse 5, God tells Jeremiah that before he was even born, **“I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”** God’s concern, then and now, is not just for his chosen people, but for the nations. God’s Word is to go out to them also. That is the call from God.

Now, the challenge: like Jeremiah, Jesus was also appointed by God to go and speak his Word. The confirmation of Jesus’ call is seen at his baptism by John in the Jordan River when the Father

said, **“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”** (Luke 3:22), and the Holy Spirit descended upon him as a dove. Like Jeremiah, Jesus’ ministry was not just to the house of Israel, but to the nations. And this is where things start to unravel for the hometown folks. Initially, they listen with rapt attention as their native son reads from the prophet Isaiah in the worship service. They’re amazed, but also skeptical: **“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”** (Luke 4:22). And the seeds of doubt and disbelief begin to take over. Jesus as the hometown-boy-who-makes-good has been impressive in his role as synagogue lector, or reader, but trouble starts when he assumes the role of synagogue preacher. Jesus challenges the people who have known him all his life to think of the wideness of God’s mercy and salvation that goes out to people beyond Israel: the widow at Zarephath to whom the prophet Elijah was sent (1 Kings 17:1, 8-24), and the Syrian general, Naaman, whose leprosy was cleansed through the ministry of Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-19). Like Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, and many others before him, Jesus’ ministry includes all people. And this is what turns the hometown folks into an angry mob: they cannot fathom that God’s mercy would extend to other people and nations. The angry mob is ready to kill Jesus, but he passes right through them and continues on his way. And so that Gospel lesson we heard on Christmas Day finds its fulfillment: **“He came to his own home, and his own people did not receive him”** (John 1:11).

It’s easy to pay lip service to the concept that God’s love is for all people. But when it comes time to make hard choices and difficult decisions about what this means for each one of us as individual believers, and for our life together as a congregation, that’s not so easy. We’ve got a homeless woman on the other side of the wall of this sanctuary; her name is Sonia. In less than a month, ESL classes will start up again with a flood of people from other cultures and nations coming into our church. We’re starting to become much more intentional in how to move forward with mission to Hispanic people, as you’ll hear from Pastor Lopez who will be preaching next weekend. The truth is that God is just as much concerned about all of these individuals as he is about us. All of these people who are “outsiders” are people for whom Christ died and shed his blood. In all of this, we can take our cue from God, who didn’t wait for his sinful people to come to him. Instead, God took the initiative to come to us by sending his only begotten Son into the world to give his life as the atoning sacrifice for us all on the tree of the cross – not for a select few, but for us all, just like we sing: “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world.”

The call is from God himself, and the challenge is to carry the good news of forgiveness and new life in Jesus to all people. May God help us to do this, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.