

“Ears to Hear”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – January 30, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the bearing of these words, that the ears of our hearts might be opened to hear your wisdom and will wherever they emerge. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Is it surprising that Jesus and Jeremiah – separated by more than 500 years – could share a common problem? Is it surprising that some of us share that same problem today? There is a lot going on in these two passages, but they're clearly connected by this timeless dynamic: society's easy dismissal of those we think of as “young.” God is giving Jeremiah an assignment, an appointment – God is giving it to him! – and Jeremiah's response is to protest that he's too young and doesn't “know how to speak!” Who told him that? Who convinced him the word he'd been given couldn't possibly be worthy? Meanwhile, Jesus – who's already been out into the desert and faced the devil and his temptations – finds a bigger challenge when faced with the hometown crowd. Their first response is to sentimentalize him – “Aww, isn't that Joe's kid?” But as he begins to share the message he's carrying, they turn on him and chase him out of town.

Why do we do this to our young people? Why do we assume that those who haven't lived as long as us don't know what they're talking about, instead of recognizing that they're seeing our world with fresh eyes and thus probably have something important to teach us? To reflect on this question in a room like this,

where we represent a wide spectrum of ages, is to admit that we need to come at the question from both directions. Some of us are still young enough to be dismissed because of our age; we must learn to reject the voices within us and outside of us that would tell us the word we need to share isn't worthy. Some of us are old enough that we're more likely to be guilty of dismissing the wisdom of younger folks and need to learn to listen with more respect and openness. And some of us are middle-aged and probably need to work on both!

Christianity has many themes and values and aims, but one thread that wends its way through our scriptures is the idea that we need to listen to children and young people. What our scriptures today make clear is that much of time when we find ourselves not wanting to hear what young people have to say, it's not even really about their age as much as it is about the fact that we don't like the content of their message! Those "fresh eyes" see things that we missed and things we've been working hard to ignore. They listen to our words about who we are and what we value, and then they notice when we're not living up to our stated beliefs.

"Now I have put 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," God said to Jeremiah. Very little of that sounds like a reason anyone would invite a guest speaker to come. Maybe God was sending young Jeremiah because anyone older would be too cynical to think it would do any good. Or maybe anyone older would be convinced they could find better words to

accomplish the goals, words people would find more palatable than the ones God was putting in Jeremiah's mouth.

The situation in Jesus' story, of course, was even more personal. It's not just that he was young – if you can call 30 young. It's that hometown thing. "Isn't that Joe's kid?" the crowd asked. There are few things that could be happening here. There's the "origins" dismissal: "we've seen you in diapers; why would you think you can tell us anything?" But there's also the "ownership" deflation: "you're one of us; you're ours; your message, your blessings, your miracles are for us." No, Jesus says. My ministry will not be confined to Nazareth, even just to Galilee. Have you seen how our God works? Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath. Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian. You cannot contain me. You cannot contain what God is doing through me, no matter what childhood antics you want to bring up to try to cut me down to size.

Hoo boy! They did not like that! This story turns from nostalgic welcome to deadly anger faster than the scroll could be properly put away. How many times had Jesus played near that cliff as a boy, with his friends, climbing around and finding all sorts of hidden paths, such that he was able to slip away unharmed? Who were these people who were so willing to turn on their "hometown boy" so dramatically just because he dared provoke them to look beyond themselves?

We talk about the Bible and the gospel – contained in scripture and larger than scripture – as good news. And yet, so much of the biblical witness is the story of

humanity trying its hardest to avoid hearing bad news. We don't want to know what we did wrong. We don't want to hear about the suffering of other parts of the body. We don't want to face up to the portions of our history in which we were not the good guys, in which salvation didn't come in time, the parts that cry out for repentance and restoration. We're not much different from the people of Nazareth. There's a reason the phrase "kill the messenger" is part of our colloquial lexicon; because it's the easiest response to bad news.

Do you remember the olden days? Back when Netflix didn't stream online but sent you DVDs in the mail instead? Do you remember the movie "Monster" starring Charlize Theron? It came out in 2003. It seemed like the kind of important movie one should watch. So we put it in our queue, and it got delivered to our house on Christine Avenue in Anniston, Alabama. And it sat there and sat there and sat there. I can't tell you anything at all about that movie, because we never watched it. It sat there for months, while we "weren't in the mood" for something that "heavy" night after night. Eventually, we just mailed it back. Bad news rejected without a hearing. We didn't threaten to throw Charlize Theron off a cliff or anything, but then again, she wasn't a childhood friend insisting we listen to her story.

So why do we call the Bible "good news" when so much of it is about people avoiding bad news? Why when we hear the prophet say "a little child shall lead them" do we sentimentalize that instead of realizing we're about to get told? And why, when our children do stand up and speak their truths, do we tell them to shut up and sit

down? Why do we let our elders do this to us, when we know the words God has put in our mouths, though they may sound like bad news, are actually proclamations of hope and liberation?

It's important that we locate ourselves in this story. Are we more likely to be dismissing younger folks or more likely to be letting older folks shush us? Are we more likely to be running off at the mouth (a common malady for all ages), or are we actually in deep enough communion with God to confidently proclaim that the words we're called to share are holy and important, even if less than welcome? How have we allowed the demonic forces of cynicism and apathy to muffle the good news that God has been pleading with us to listen for, and share, and amplify?

If we hear a story about a widow in Zarephath getting a bottle of oil that never empties or a military commander in Syria being cured of his leprosy, do we only grumble about how feeding and healing need to start at home, or do we rejoice that these beloved ones of God were liberated from hunger and disease? If we hear that our children are reading books that unflinchingly tell the stories of the darkest parts of our history, do we rush to silence those truths and pretend our kids need coddling more than they need truth, or do we read the difficult books alongside them and confess our shared need to work for a better future, guided by their compassion and wisdom?

The truth that the villagers in Nazareth missed is that if we face the bad news alongside our young people, held firmly in the arms of God, it can be transformed

into good news. Stories of destruction can become stories of building up. Stories of deprivation can become stories of generosity. Stories of cruelty can become stories of repentance and reparation. Stories of oppression and shame can become stories of liberation and partnership.

Our tendency to turn away from the bad news and shush the little ones among us who pipe up to say the emperor has nothing on is a timeless weakness. But God's presence amongst us, prodding us to listen with courage and hope, is eternal.

Whether we're old or young, God is offering us words to share – words of hope, words of caution, words of courage, “words of challenge, said with care,” as the hymn goes. Whether we're young or old, we can be part of sharing this witness of hope with a world badly in need of some good news. May it be so. Hallelujah and Amen.