

Bible Study
Proper 16, Year C
August 21, 2016

[RCL] Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Jeremiah 1:4–10

For readers interested in learning about biblical prophecy, the description of the call of the prophet Jeremiah rewards careful study. Consider reading this passage alongside three others: Deuteronomy 18 with its advice for recognizing authentic prophets; Exodus 4 with its description of Moses resisting a call to prophecy; and Isaiah 6 with its vision of seraphs and a burning coal touching the prophet's mouth. Beside these passages, the call of Jeremiah seems striking for how carefully it casts the prophet in a Mosaic mold and for how intimately the Lord calls to Jeremiah. No seraphs and burning coals here—or burning bushes, for that matter; just the “word of the Lord” saying that Jeremiah was born for the task ahead of him.

*“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.”*

But readers don't need to approach this passage with curiosity about prophecy or even with a desire to learn more about Jeremiah. For the account of Jeremiah's call raises a more universal question: Is God calling me?

- Have you ever felt called by God?
- Jeremiah hears the Lord's call and protests: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” What excuses do we make to keep us from living the lives God calls us to live? How can we learn to overcome them?

Psalm 71:1–6

The rich language of the psalms can sometimes be hard to parse, as piled-up metaphors grow slippery. In these six verses, God is described abstractly (as hope, confidence, strength); concretely (as a strong rock, a castle, a crag); as an object of a supplicant's petitions (to be free from shame, delivered from oppressors, and simply to be heard) and as an object of praise.

As happens so often in Biblical poetry, the literary features of the text take on theological force and meaning. Whatever the threat we face - however strong the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor or however weak we feel to oppose them - God can be our refuge. The range of metaphors suggests the breadth of God's power and the wideness of God's mercy - and that both, blessedly, are expansive enough in their reach for even you and for me.

- How can steadfast faith be a bulwark against shame and a guard against the powers our enemies seek to exert over us? Can you think of an instance in which this has been true for you?

- How might we turn to God to keep us in safety when our enemies are not other people but rather aspects of ourselves (e.g., our love of gossip, our bitter envy, our genius for selfishness)?

Hebrews 12:18–29

After contrasting Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion and the old and new covenants, the author of Hebrews addresses us: “See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking...”

It’s safe to presume that most mature Christians have known occasions when God’s voice seemed - for some time anyway - to have fallen silent. God’s apparent absences, whether real or imagined, can provoke spiritual crises that turn us from belief - or (if we are wise or lucky) they can lead to newer, deeper forms of faith.

This passage suggests a different sort of crisis, one triggered not by God’s silence but by God’s clarity. It’s safe to presume that most mature Christians have encountered this sort of dilemma, too: when scripture couldn’t be clearer; when our conscience awakens us to another’s suffering; when the wafer and the wine we receive at the communion rail become to us the body and blood of Christ. How can we then stubbornly refuse to reply to God’s voice? How can reverence and awe melt away till we are returned to our numb routines of carelessness and sin? The author of Hebrews urges us to respond to such instances of clarity with steadfastness and gratitude. May God help us to do so.

- What spiritual practices have helped you through instances when God’s voice seemed silent to you?
- What practices have helped nurture your gratitude for God?

Luke 13: 10–17

“But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.’”

Why is the leader of the synagogue so indignant? Does he feel his own authority is threatened by Jesus’s display of love and power? Is he sincerely worried that the apparent (and public) violation of one of God’s laws might weaken his people’s will to adhere to others?

Perhaps he is worried about losing pledging members. If so, he has something in common with those of us today, who sometimes look around our pews on Sunday mornings with insecure thoughts buzzing about those who are not in church rather than being attentive to those who are. In an age of falling membership numbers, perhaps this passage ought to be read as a cautionary tale about how fear for an institution’s security can blind us to God’s activity in the world.

Or perhaps we ought not be so quick to dismiss the synagogue leader. “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured.” Sure, he got it wrong about the seventh day, but don’t *we* get it wrong about the other six? Jesus is the Great Physician, but don’t we too often behave as though his office is only open for an hour or so on Sunday mornings?

- What practices help you grow spiritually during the week? What else might be worth trying?
- How do you keep the Sabbath holy?

Written by Robert Pennoyer.

Robert Pennoyer is a third-year seminarian at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, where he is also a member of the Institute of Sacred Music. He is a candidate for ordination to the priesthood in the Diocese of New York. He lives in New Haven with his wife and their one-year-old daughter.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

© 2016 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.