

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany
January 30, 2022.
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Chester, Vermont.

Scriptures:

Jeremiah 1:4-10;
Psalm 71:106; 1
Corinthians 13:1-13;
Luke 4:21-30.

Hymns:

Entrance Hymn 410 – *The Hymnal 1982* – *Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven* – (our organist's favorite hymn);
Sequence Hymn 143 in *Voices Found*: Love, astounding, love confounding limits fearful minds impose;
Offertory Hymn 448, *The Hymnal 1982*: O love, how deep, how broad, how high;
Communion Hymn 183 – *Lift Every Voice and Sing II*;
Closing Hymn 530, *The Hymnal 1982* – Spread, O spread thou mighty word.

“BEFORE I FORMED YOU IN THE WOMB I KNEW YOU, AND BEFORE YOU WERE BORN I CONSECRATED YOU.” THESE WORDS ARE REPORTED AS ADDRESSED TO THE PROPHET JEREMIAH. THEY ARE UTTERED PREEMPTIVELY BEFORE JEREMIAH CAN UTTER HIS OWN RELUCTANCE, HIS REJECTION, OF GOD’S CALL FOR HIM TO CARRY OUT HIS PROPHETIC MINISTRY. I WONDER IF JEREMIAH’S MOTHER WAS AWARE OF GOD’S KNOWING OF JEREMIAH BEFORE HE WAS EVEN A FETUS. WAS THERE A DIVINE ULTRA SOUND THAT MIGHT HAVE REVEALED WOULD HAVE REVEALED THAT TO HE, AND REVEALED TO HIS MOTHER, THAT HE WAS A CONSECRATED BEING.

WE CAN SPECULATE ON HER ROLE IN THE FETAL AND INFANT DEVELOPMENT OF THIS CONSECRATED BEING.

MIGHT SHE HAVE BEEN THE FORMATION AGENT OF THIS PROPHET AND HAVE RECEIVED ALMOST NO CREDIT FOR HER ROLE? THERE IS NO RECORD OF AN ANNUNCIATION TO JEREMIAH'S MOTHER. NOT EVEN ANY RECORD OF HER NAME. HIS FATHER WAS HILKIAH, A BENJAMINITE PRIEST, BUT NO MENTION OF HIS MOTHER. DID GOD ENLIST HER HELP OR ASK HER PERMISSION TO FORM THIS PROPHET IN HER WOMB?

SUCH A GAMBLE ON GOD'S PART TO KNOW AND SELECT JEREMIAH FOR THIS TASK OF WHAT BECAME SOCIO-POLITICAL PROPHECY. SOCIAL POLITICAL PREACHING!! IT APPEARS FROM THE VERSES WE READ TODAY THAT JEREMIAH COULD HAVE REFUSED HIS ASSIGNMENT. DOES GOD KNOW IN ADVANCE THAT JEREMIAH WILL NOT REFUSE THE MINISTRY TO WHICH GOD HAS CALLED FROM BEFORE HIS CONCEPTION IN THE WOMB?

IF GOD KNOWS THE OUTCOME IN ADVANCE, WHY ARE NOT ALL OUTCOMES IN THE DIRECTION OF GOD'S DESIRE SPEEDILY ACCOMPLISHED BY GOD'S SIMPLE DIRECTION.

I HEREBY MAKE HIM A PROPHET. I HEREBY MAKE YOU A FARMER. I HEREBY MAKE YOU A PARENT. I HEREBY MAKE YOU A VESTRY MEMBER?

THERE IS NO WAY WE HUMANS CAN KNOW WHAT GOD KNOWS OR DOESN'T KNOW IN HUMAN TERMS. NO WAY WITHOUT DECLARING OURSELVES TO BE GOD.

WHEN WE HUMANS CONCEIVE A CHILD, WE DO SO SOMETIMES BY PLANNING AND SOMETIMES NOT. HOW MANY OF US, I WONDER, ARE MORE OR LESS ACCIDENTAL CONCEPTIONS? WOULD IT BE INTERESTING TO HAVE A RECORD FOR ANALYSIS? WHAT ARE THE LIFE OUTCOMES FOR THOSE WHOSE CONCEPTION WAS NOT PLANNED? A PH.D. DISSERTATION IN THE MAKING THERE!

AND YET AN ELEMENT OF ONE OF THE SEVERAL FORMS LOVE IS A MOTIVATING FACTOR IN OUR COMING TO CONCEIVE A CHILD. THOSE FORMS OF LOVE ARE BUILT INTO US FROM BEFORE OUR BIRTH AS WE INHABIT A COSMOS WHERE GOD'S LOVE SIMPLY ISSUES IN CREATION, A CREATION LOVED BY ITS CREATOR BECAUSE THE CREATOR IS LOVE. THE CREATOR IN SHARING BEING WITH US BUILDS LOVE INTO US AS A CENTRAL PART OF OUR BEING. BIOLOGISTS, PSYCHOBIOLOGISTS, FIND EVIDENCE THAT LOVING CARE FOR EACH OTHER , PLACING THE OTHER'S WELL BEING AS FOREMOST, IS THE MOST POWERFUL FACTOR IN OUR SURVIVAL AND THRIVING AS COMMUNITIES.

WHEN BARUCH OR WHOEVER WROTE AND COMPILED JEREMIAH HE WROTE FROM THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE. AND HIS HUMAN MIND AND EXPERIENCE FELT AND THOUGHT AND CONCLUDED THAT GOD DOES INDEED KNOW US FULLY. THAT FULLNESS OF LOVE IS PART OF OUR BEING TO HAND ON TO OUR CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES. THE GOD OF JEREMIAH SO SURROUNDS JEREMIAH WITH LOVE. LOVE HE KNEW FROM HIS UNNAMED MOTHER, AND MAYBE FROM KILKIAH HIS DAD. THIS LOVE SO SURROUNDS HIM THAT HE GOES ON WITH EXPOUNDING GOD'S CARE FOR THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLES THAT JEREMIAH PREACHES TO, LEADING TO JEREMIAH'S IMPRISONMENT AND EXILE.

JESUS, WHOSE MOTHER DID GIVE HER ASSENT TO CARRYING JESUS IN HER WOMB, AND BIRTHING HIM, AND LOVING HIM IN SUCH A WAY THAT BY THE TIME HE WAS FIRST EXERCISING HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY HE WAS ALREADY ACCLAIMED WHEN HE RETURNED TO HIS HOME TOWN .
"THIS IS JESUS FROM ACROSS THE TOWN HERE WITH US TODAY."

THIS WEEK'S GOSPEL CONTINUES FROM LAST WEEK AND GIVES US THE REACTION OF THE PEOPLE TO HIS PREACHING.

FIRST OFF, THERE IS ALREADY HOPE THAT THIS NEIGHOR'S KID MIGHT BE THE ONE TO LEAD HIS OWN PEOPLE TO POWER AND CONTROL. FOR A CHANGE, GIVE US DOMINANCE. WE'VE BEEN SUBJECT TO ROMAN OPPRESSION FOR TOO LONG. MAKE NAZARETH FIRST. MAKE GALILEE FIRST.

BUT WHAT DOES LUKE'S JESUS CHOOSE TO READ ABOUT AND EMBRACE?

HE TELLS THEM THE STORY OF ELIJAH GOING TO A NON-HEBREW, A NON-JEW, A GENTILE, THE WIDOW AT ZAREPHATH IN SIDON, TO SAVE HER AND HER SON FROM FAMINE AND DEATH.

HE TELLS THEM THE STORY OF ELIJAH'S SUCCESSOR, ELISHA, CLEANSING NAAMAN. ANOTHER GENTILE, A SYRIAN GENERAL, FROM HIS LEPROSY, RATHER THAN ONE OR MORE OF THE JEWISH LEPERS AWAITING HEALING.

IN EFFECT, HE TELLS THEM, THE GOD OF LOVE WHO CREATED YOU AND ME OUT OF LOVE SEEKS TO MOVE YOU TO THE SPIRIT OF AGAPE, THE LOVE PAUL WRITES OF IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13, THE LOVE THAT PLACES THE WELFARE OF OTHERS FIRST. JESUS MESSAGE ANGERED THE SYNOGOGUE FULL OF HIS TOWNSFOLK.

“YOU COME INTO OUR MIDST AND ASK US TO BLESS SIDONIANS, OUTSIDERS, AND SYRIANS. YOU COME INTO OUR MIDST AND ASK US TO HOUSE AND FEED THOSE OUR FELLOW HUMANS HAVE MISTREEATED. “

PAUL A GENERATION LATER THAN THIS LESSON READING OF JESUS – WRITES OF AGAPE, THE LOVE THAT LOOKS TO CARE FOR THE OTHER.

THIS IS THE LOVE THAT KNOWS US IN THE WOMB AND FILLS OUR SPIRIT TO OPEN OUR HOMES TO ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES. OPENS OUR HEARTS TO STRUGGLE OVER WHAT TO DO FOR STARVATION IN AFGHANISTAN.

THE ANGER? YES, IT IS STILL AMONG US IN REACTION TO JESUS TEACHING AND GOD'S LOVE. AMERICA FIRST, WE SAY. WHEN THE SPIRIT BUILT INTO US TOUCHES OUR HEARTS, WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO REACT IN OUR COMPLEX WORLD. WE FACE QUESTIONS LIKE WILL THE FINANCIAL AND AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES WE PROVIDE FOR THE PEOPLE OF AFGHANISTAN REACH THOSE IN NEED, OR WILL THEY SIMPLY STRENGTHEN THE OPPRESSIVE AND INHUMAN POWER OF THE TALIBAN?

WE DON'T KNOW THE ANSWERS. AND YET, WE CAN TRY SOME SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES LIKE PRAYING FOR THOSE WE SEE AS OUR ENEMIES. MAYBE FIND A NAME OF TWO OF TALIBAN LEADERS AND HOLD THEM IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE. NOT AS A MANIPULATION TO ASK GOD TO MAKE THEM CONFORM TO MY WILL. BUT SIMPLY HOLDING THEM IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE. PERHAPS TO DO THE SAME WITH AN AMERICAN POLITICAL OPPONENT OF OURS. OR WITH AN UNAMERICAN LIKE VLADIMIR PUTIN. OR BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT ALEXANDER LUKASCHENKO.

THE STREAM OF GOD'S HEALING LOVE CONTINUES TO SURROUND US. FOR THE FIRST TIME, GERMANY'S CABINET IS 50% WOMEN. HOLY SPIRIT AT WORK IN GERMANY?

AND SO WHILE HISTORICALLY WE DROVE JESUS OUT OF TOWN FOR LETTING US SEE OURSELVES AS WE ARE, AND

OPENING OUR HEARTS TO TRANSFORMATION INTO AGAPEIC
LOVING BEINGS SEEKING A REDEEMED WORLD.

“YOU MEAN WE GALILEEANS AND NAZARETH PEOPLE ARE
NOT ALREADY THE MOST DESERVING OF BLESSING

GOD’S LOVE WORKING IN THE SPIRIT AS WE OPEN
OURSELVES TO GOD’S PRESENCE LET’S US SEE OURSELVES
AND BE LOVED INTO NEW LIFE. THAT IS A WORK THAT
WILL NEVER END. DISCOURAGING? OR PERHAPS
WONDERFULLY HEALING, AS WE DISCOVER NEW WAYS TO
PRAY AND LOVE.

PRAYING NOT JUST TO GOD, BUT INCLUDED IN GOD’S
BEING WITH YOU AND ALL THE REST OF GOD’S BEINGS.

YESTERDAY’S MORNING PRAYER READING FROM THE
BOOK OF GENESIS TOLD THE STORY OF THE THREE ANGELIC
STRANGERS VISITING ABRAHAM AND SARAH BY THE OAK
OF MAMRE. THE THREE BEINGS HAVE BEEN INTERPRETED
AS THE HOLY TRINITY. THE VISIT IS CLAIMED BY THE
EASTERN AND ESPECIALLY BY THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AS
THE FIRST HISTORICALLY RECORDED VISIT OF GOD AMONG
HUMANS. IN THIS VISIT THE VISITORS ARE FED BY SARAH
AND ABRAHAM. THEY ANNOUNCE TO THIS 90 YEAR OLD
WOMAN AND THE 100 YEAR OLD MAN THAT SARAH WILL
CONCEIVE AND GIVE BIRTH TO A CHILD, WHO SHALL BE
NAMED ISAAC. IT’S A WONDERFUL STORY. SARAH IS
BEHIND THE SCENES IN THE TENT WHILE ABRAHAM AND
THE VISITORS EAT TOGEHER. SHE HEARS THEM PREDICT
THE CONCEPTION AND BIRTH AND SAYS TO HERSELF WITH
PERHAPS HILARIOUS LAUGHTER, “NOW THAT I AM OLD AND
MY HUSBAND IS OLD, SHALL I HAVE PLEASURE?” SHE
DENIES LAUGHING.

THE LORD SAYS TO ABRAHAM “WHY DID SARAH LAUGH AND SAY SHALL I INDEED BEAR A CHILD NOW THAT I AM OLD? IS ANYTHING TO WONDERFUL FOR THE LORD?”

THE STORY AND TRADITION SO INSPIRED A MONK AND ICONOGRAPHER NAMED ANDRE OR ANDREW RUBLEV THAT IN ABOUT 1450 HE PAINTED THE BEAUTIFUL ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY FOR HOLY TRINITY AND SAINT SERGIUS MONASTERY.

(See the icon at the end)

NOTICE THE MUTUAL CARE AND REGARD OF THE THREE PERSONS FOR EACH OTHER. A FAINT AURA IS VISIBLE IN THE LARGER ORIGINAL WITH NO BOUNDARIES, EXTENDING OUT BEYOND THE BOUNDARY OF THE PAINTING. THAT IS THE AURA OF GOD’S BEING AND LOVE REACHING OUT TO INCLUDE YOU AND ME AND ALL OF CREATION. CHESTER FOLKS, CHRISTIANS, HINDUS, MUSLIMS, THE WORSHIP OF INDIGENOUS CULTURES.

SOMETIMES GOOGLE THIS ICON AND SIT WITH AS REPRODUCTION OF IT LETTING YOURSELF BE INCLUDED IN THE VERY VEING GOD SHARES WITH US. THE PROCESS IS CALLED “DIVINIZATION” BY THE ORTHODOX. IT IS A LIFE LONG PROCESS.

THEN AS YOU GAZE AT THE OCON, PERHAPS HOLD UP THE HYMN WE SANG BEFORE THE GOSPEL AND SPEAK OR SING IT ALOUD, CONCLUDING WITH THE PHRASES, LOVE UNENDING, **LOVE OF GOD ENFOLDING ALL. LOVE UNENDING. LOVE OF GOD ENFOLDING ALL.**

AMEN

