

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

Pentecost 18, Year B

Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

St. Paul's Episcopal Church

September 22, 2024

As you might know, today is the 18th Sunday after Pentecost. We are in this long season of Sundays that stretch through the summer and terminate with the Feast of Christ the King on the last Sunday of the Church year before we begin again with Advent. But after taking a look at the readings, it rather feels like perhaps we are in the middle of Holy Week. We heard in the words of the prophet Jeremiah what we interpret through a Christian lens, a prophecy that was fulfilled in the suffering and passion of Jesus. "But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter." And then in the Gospel of Mark, we hear Jesus predicting his own death, telling his disciples "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But I want to save this approach to these texts for Holy Week, which occurs in April next year. I want to focus rather on something else in the texts we have for this morning, and that is this question: How do we respond to truth?

Let's go back to Jeremiah and look at his words again. "It was the Lord who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!" To make sense of these words it is helpful to know that in the verses that precede the ones we heard this morning, we get a record of Jeremiah, a mouthpiece for God, warning God's people of the consequences of their actions. You see, God was giving this warning to the people because they had turned against God. They had broken their covenant with God and had been tempted and drawn away by other idols. And so the verses we get this morning contain what Jeremiah fears to be the response of the people to his warning. In his own words he says, "I gave you the truth. I told you what God has instructed me to tell you. And yet you lead me away like a lamb to the slaughter. You cut me off from the land of the living so that my name will not be remembered." What was the response to Jeremiah telling God's people the truth, what they needed to hear? His own life was threatened.

Then in Mark we hear Jesus doing something akin to what Jeremiah did- predicting his own demise. Like Jeremiah, he had spent his ministry proclaiming truth- truth that God loves everyone, truth that God requires that we worship not only with our lips but with our lives, truth that God has a preference for the poor and the outcast and stranger, truth that calls us to care for the least among us, and truth that to really know God, we must become like those who are least. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And Jesus not only proclaimed truth, he was truth- he embodied truth. As God incarnate, Jesus was and is the source and author of truth. And how did those who heard Jesus's teaching respond to truth? "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill

him.” Jesus knew the fate of the prophets that had gone before him, and so he was able to predict his own fate to be like that of the truth-tellers of yore.

Of course the disciples would not have understood this. We’re told they didn’t understand this. And what did they talk about on their way to Capernaum? Did they discuss this mysterious prophecy their Lord had spoken? Maybe. But we are told that they argued over who was the greatest among them. This is one of those parts of the story where we almost have to laugh at how on the nose it is, right? Jesus speaks truth to them and tries to draw them further into the mystery of who he is, and they rather get tied up on themselves, discussing who should get the Best Disciple of the Year Award.

And what does Jesus do? He teaches them. He doesn’t judge them. Or roll his eyes at them. (Well, maybe he rolled his eyes at them.) But the point is he met their full display of humanity with grace and love. In knowing that they were not prepared to receive the truth he was offering them, he met them where they were, and taught them.

If we’re honest with ourselves, sometimes we are a bit like the disciples: well-intentioned, but missing God’s offering of truth to us because we are too caught up in ourselves to hear- to really hear- God speaking to us. It often takes something drastic or dramatic to get our attention. I was having coffee with a parishioner this week, and we were talking about how God speaks to us, how God calls us. We were commenting on how God often speaks subtly, softly. And at that moment, a small limb from a tree branch overhead dropped between us, landing on the table with a thud. We laughed. How easy would it be for us to do this listening to God if God always made known God’s presence to us in such obvious ways?

As a parish in transition right now with discernment at the center of all that we are doing, I think it is as important as ever that we are listening for the voice of God- that we are looking for God’s truth conveyed to us. As we do this work of discernment, we are asking questions like “Who are we?” and “Where is God calling us?” And, by the way, this isn’t just work for the Rector Search Committee. All of us are listening for God to speak. And this is what God promises us when we do this work. We heard it from James this morning: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.” If we are willing to offer up our own humanity, stay plugged into truth- even when it may be hard to hear or see, God will teach us, too, just like Jesus taught the disciples. This time of transition we are in right now can be rich, for God will meet us where we are and reveal God’s will for us. We will draw near to God, and God will draw near to us. May it be so. Amen.