

YEAR C – PROPER 16C

21 AUGUST 2022

PSALM 71:1-6

JEREMIAH 1:4-10

IN 1994, PIANIST JIM BRICKMAN RELEASED HIS FIRST ALBUM, TITLED “NO WORDS.” HE HAS BECOME THE BEST SELLING PIANIST OF OUR TIME. HE HAS EARNED 21 NUMBER 1 ALBUMS, 32 TOP 20 HITS AND TWO GRAMMY NOMINATIONS. HE HAS SOLD EIGHT MILLION ALBUMS WORLD WIDE.

I THINK IT IS IRONIC THAT HIS CAREER ACTUALLY STARTED AS A JINGLE WRITER FOR HIS ADVERTISING AGENCY. HIS SKILL WITH WORDS LED TO HIS DEBUT ALBUM WHICH WAS VOID OF WORDS. HIS GOAL FOR MUSIC IS TO SOOTHE, INSPIRE, CELEBRATE AND LOVE. IT SEEMS HE HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL.

IT SEEMS THE ADVANTAGE TO THE ABSENCE OF WORDS COULD BE SIMPLIFICATION. THERE ARE SONGS ABOUT THE WORDS GETTING IN THE WAY OF A MESSAGE OR SIMPLY COMING OUT THE WRONG WAY. IT CAN BE EASIER TO RELAX AND RETREAT WITHOUT DIALOGUE.

YET, AT SOME POINT, WE HAVE TO ENGAGE WORDS.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS.

I CAN STILL REMEMBER A TEACHER IN JUNIOR HIGH – HIS NAME WAS KARL SCHELLING – DECLARING THAT WITHOUT WORDS, THERE ARE NO IDEAS.

WORDS CAN DATE US. HISTORY IS EMBEDDED IN THEM. AT MY GRANDMOTHER’S HOME, THE MIDDLE MEAL OF THE DAY WAS DINNER. THE EVENING MEAL WAS SUPPER. LUNCH WAS LIKE A BIG SNACK WHICH MIGHT HAPPEN IN THE AFTERNOON OR THE EVENING. MY ROOMMATE FRESHMAN YEAR OF COLLEGE DIDN’T USE WATER FOUNTAINS. HE USED BUBBLERS.

FOR MORE THREE DECADES I HAVE WORKED IN AND AROUND OPERATING ROOMS. THERE ARE MULTIPLE NAMES FOR MOST PIECES OF EQUIPMENT, INSTRUMENTS, SUPPLIES, PROCEDURES AND DRUGS. THE CHALLENGE IS YOU NEVER QUITE KNOW THEM ALL. I SPEND A LOT OF ENERGY VERIFYING THE SUBJECT.

YEARS AGO I WORKED WITH A SURGEON WHO USED HAND SIGNALS RATHER THAN SPEAK. HE TOLD ME, "I WILL ONLY GO THROUGH THIS ONCE, SO PAY ATTENTION.

HEMOSTAT – OPEN HAND

BLADE – TWO FINGERS OUT

FORCEPS – POINTER AND THUMB

SCISSORS –

TIE –

STITCH –

ONCE ACCUSTOMED TO THE SYMBOLS FOR WORDS, IT CAN BE AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO COMMUNICATE. BUT ... IT TAKES EFFORT.

IN OUR CULTURE COLORS HAVE MEANING. RED MEANS STOP. GREEN MEANS GO. YELLOW MEANS ... SPEED UP.

I THINK ONE OF THE GREAT IRONIES IN LIFE IS LIBRARIES. LIBRARIES ARE BUILDINGS FULL OF BOOKS. BOOKS WHICH ARE FULL OF WORDS. WHILE WE ARE INUNDATED WITH WORDS, WE CANNOT OR WILL NOT UTTER A WORD AT SPEAKING LEVEL

MY UNCLE WAS A SMALL TOWN NEWSPAPER EDITOR. HE WAS NOT MUCH OF A CHURCH GOER. I CAN VIVIDLY REMEMBER HIM QUOTING THE FIRST CHAPTER OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN OF THE KING JAMES VERSION.... IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD. AND HE LOOKED ME IN THE EYE AND SAID, "YOU BETTER HAVE THE RIGHT WORDS."

WRITERS AND PREACHERS WILL TESTIFY TO THE ANGST WORD CHOICE CAN CREATE.

CAN YOU IMAGINE TRYING TO DO A JOB WITHOUT THE VERNACULAR?

JEREMIAH WAS RELUCTANT TO RESPOND TO GOD'S CALL BECAUSE HE LACKED WORDS. HE BLAMED THIS ON HIS YOUTH. HE WASN'T THE FIRST TO USE THAT EXCUSE. MOSES WAS NOT ARTICULATE, EITHER. AND HE THOUGHT HE WAS TOO OLD.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH WERE THOUGHT TO BE TOO OLD.

DAVID WAS THOUGHT TO BE TOO YOUNG.

MAYBE MARY WAS TOO YOUNG.

GOD DOESN'T BELIEVE IN WORK PERMITS, THE AGE OF MAJORITY OR MANDATORY RETIREMENT.

JEREMIAH HAD BEEN CONSECRATED – SET APART – PRIOR TO BIRTH. THIS WASN'T JUST HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF A MONARCHY OR PEER PRESSURE. THIS WAS A LIFELONG MISSION.

AND IT WAS A TOUGH MISSION. JEREMIAH DID NOT DELIVER GOOD NEWS TO THE NATIONS. HIS MESSAGE THAT GOD IS ANGRY ABOUT INJUSTICE AND THAT GOD WILL PUNISH THOSE WHO MISTREAT EACH OTHER WAS NOT POPULAR. HONEST, HARSH WORDS DO NOT PLAY WELL. PEOPLE WANTED TO HEAR THE PROPHETS TALK ABOUT GREEN PASTURES, STILL WATERS AND A LAND FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY. GOD ENCOURAGES JEREMIAH NOT TO BE AFRAID BECAUSE GOD IS WITH HIM AND GOD WILL DELIVER HIM. THE RULERS OF JEREMIAH'S OWN PEOPLE WILL OPPOSE HIM AND HIS MESSAGE. JEREMIAH IS BEATEN, THROWN IN THE STOCKS, CALLED A TRAITOR, THREATENED WITH DEATH AND DENOUNCED BY PROPHETS WITH A MORE MARKETABLE MESSAGE. HIS OWN RELATIVES ARE AGAINST HIM. IS IT ANY WONDER HE IS CALLED THE WEEPING PROPHET?

GOD IS WITH HIM AND DELIVERS HIM, JUST AS HE PROMISED IN VERSE 8. THIS PROMISE IS CONSISTENT WITH HOW GOD CALLS AND EMPOWERS OTHERS –

–WHEN THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CALLS GIDEON A MIGHTY WARRIOR, GIDEON OBJECTS VIGOROUSLY. THE ENCOURAGEMENT HE RECEIVED IN RESPONSE IS THE LORD IS THE ONE SENDING HIM AND WILL BE WITH HIM (JUDGES 6:14-16).

–WHEN GOD CALLED MOSES, MOSES OBJECTED WITH THE QUESTION, “WHO AM I?” GOD’S ULTIMATE ANSWER IS ABOUT WHO GOD IS (EXODUS 3:11-14).

–IN 2 CORINTHIANS 2, SPEAKING OF HIS OWN MINISTRY AND HARDSHIP, PAUL ASKS, “WHO IS SUFFICIENT FOR THESE THINGS?” A FEW VERSES LATER HE ANSWERS HIS OWN QUESTION. “NOT THAT WE ARE SUFFICIENT ON OUR OWN . . . OUR SUFFICIENCY IS FROM GOD.” LIKE JEREMIAH, GOD CALLS US TO DO NOT BECAUSE OF WHO WE ARE BUT BECAUSE OF THE ONE WHO IS WITH US.

THE CALL OF JEREMIAH LAST SEVEN VERSES, BUT HIS MINISTRY LAST FORTY YEARS. FORTY TOUGH YEARS.

HIS MISSION STARTED IN HIS YOUTH. HE LACKED WORDS. GOD GAVE HIM WORDS AND HE BORE THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS FAITHFULNESS TO GOD.

ONE COMMENTARY SUGGESTED THAT PERHAPS JEREMIAH COULD HAVE PRAYED THE WORDS OF PSALM 71. CHRIS READ THAT EARLIER FOR US.

RHODORA BEATON OFFERS SOME INSIGHT: THE CALL TO BE A PROPHET IMPLIES BOTH INTIMACY WITH GOD AND A CONFRONTATIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD. THE ONE WHO IS APPOINTED TO “PLUCK UP AND TO PULL DOWN, TO DESTROY AND TO OVERTHROW, TO BUILD AND TO PLANT” IS LIKELY TO NEED A “ROCK OF REFUGE” BEHIND WHICH TO HIDE, OR A RESCUER READY TO “INCLINE AN EAR.” THE PSALMIST COULD BE HEARD AS THE VOICE OF WISDOM SPEAKING THROUGH THE AGES TO THE YOUNG PROPHETS JEREMIAH AND JESUS, AND PERHAPS ALSO TO THE PROPHETS IN THE LITURGICAL ASSEMBLY.

PSALM 71 IS RETROSPECTIVE. IT IS A LOOK BACK ON A LONG RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. THE WORDS AGED AND ELDERLY ARE USED TO DESCRIBE THE WRITER. AND WE HEAR SOME FAMILIAR THEMES:

1. GOD KNEW US BEFORE WE WE WERE BORN
2. GOD IS WITH US ALWAYS AND WILL DELIVER US

IN HIS BOOK, RUN WITH THE HORSES, EUGENE PETERSON OFFERS SOME INSIGHT ON THESE VERSES:

“LONG BEFORE WE GOT INTERESTED IN THE SUBJECT OF GOD, BEFORE IT EVER CROSSED OUR MINDS THAT GOD MIGHT BE IMPORTANT, HE SINGLED US OUT AS IMPORTANT. BEFORE WE WERE FORMED IN THE WOMB, GOD KNEW US...

“THERE IS AN ENORMOUS GAP BETWEEN WHAT WE THINK WE CAN DO AND WHAT GOD CALLS US TO DO. OUR IDEAS OF WHAT WE CAN DO OR WANT TO DO ARE TRIVIAL. GOD’S IDEAS FOR US ARE GRAND.

“IT IS NOT OUR FEELINGS THAT DETERMINE OUR LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION IN LIFE, NOR OUR EXPERIENCE THAT QUALIFIES US FOR WHAT WE WILL DO AND BE. IT IS WHAT GOD DECIDES ABOUT US. GOD DOES NOT SEND US INTO THE DANGEROUS AND EXACTING LIFE OF FAITH BECAUSE WE ARE QUALIFIED; HE CHOOSES US IN ORDER TO QUALIFY US FOR WHAT HE WANTS US TO BE AND TO DO.”

I WISH I HAD HEARD THOSE WORDS ABOUT FORTY YEARS AGO. I WAS A 17 YEAR OLD ELDER WITH A LIMITED VOCABULARY. LIKE JEREMIAH, I DIDN'T KNOW THE WORDS. I'VE WONDERED IF THAT WAS GOD TEACHING ME HOW TO LISTEN. MY HUNCH IS THE MESSAGE WAS PROBABLY OUT THERE, BUT I DIDN'T HEAR IT OR UNDERSTAND IT.

DONALD MCKIM HAS HAD A PROLIFIC CAREER AS A WRITER AND PROFESSOR. HE OFFERS THE FOLLOWING THOUGHTS: THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE AND IN OUR OWN LIVES, THE EXPERIENCE OF JEREMIAH IS BORN OUT: GOD CHOOSES US. GOD CHOOSES US TO SERVE GOD, TO COME TO FAITH IN CHRIST, TO BE DRAWN INTO THE CHURCH AND TO BE WITNESSES AND DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST IN THIS WORLD. THE INITIATIVE IN OUR SALVATION AND IN OUR CALLINGS AND MINISTRIES IS GOD'S. THE PROMISES WE RECEIVE FROM GOD ARE GROUNDED IN GOD'S CALL, GOD'S TAKING US AS WE ARE, AND GOD CALLING US INTO WHO GOD WANTS US TO BE AS GOD'S PEOPLE ENGAGED IN MISSION AND MINISTRY.

GOD TAKES THE INITIATIVE IN CALLING US AND CONTINUING TO BE WITH US. WE NEED NOT FEAR, FOR GOD IS WITH US TO RESCUE AND DELIVER.

IT IS 2022. WE ARE IN THIS PLACE CALLED THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BATTLE CREEK, MICHIGAN. HOW WILL WE ENGAGE IN MINISTRY AND MISSION?

OUR BULLETIN IS LOADED WITH POSSIBILITIES.

IF YOU FEEL LIKE JEREMIAH AND MOSES AND THE WORDS ARE A CHALLENGE – PASTOR MIKE WILL BE LEADING A CLASS ON WORSHIP LEADERSHIP THIS FALL. THIS IS A MARVELOUS OPPORTUNITY. I ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO EXPLORE THIS POSSIBILITY.

YEARS AGO I HEARD THE EXPRESSION THAT A FIELD IS A FIELD IS A FIELD UNTIL YOU'VE PLANTED ONE. AS A ONE TIME WANNABE FARMER AND THE DESCENDANT OF FARMERS IT RESONATED WITH ME.

I THINK THE SAME PRINCIPLE APPLIES IN FORMING A MESSAGE. A SERMON IS A SERMON IS A SERMON UNTIL YOU'VE PREACHED ONE.

I PREACHED FOR THE FIRST TIME ALMOST 20 YEARS AGO. IT HAS CONTINUED TO BE A SOURCE OF GROWTH FOR ME. THIS CHURCH HAS SO MANY BRIGHT, CREATIVE AND TALENTED PEOPLE WHO HAVE MUCH TO SHARE. I ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO CONSIDER THIS POSSIBILITY.

THE CHARITABLE UNION NEEDS VOLUNTEERS.
THE CROP WALK IS THE LAST SUNDAY IN SEPTEMBER.
THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES TO DONATE TO STUFF A BUS,
BLANKETS FOR VETERANS AND THE HEALTH FAIR.

MOTHER TERESA ONCE SAID, "NOT ALL OF US CAN DO GREAT THINGS.
BUT WE CAN DO SMALL THINGS WITH GREAT LOVE."

EDMUND BURKE WAS A PHILOSOPHER AND ECONOMIST FROM THE
18TH CENTURY. HE OFFERED THE FOLLOWING WORDS: "NOBODY MADE A
GREATER MISTAKE THAN HE WHO DID NOTHING BECAUSE HE COULD ONLY DO
A LITTLE."

FROM I CORINTHIANS 12 WE ARE ALL PART OF THE BODY OF CHRIST.

JESUS REMINDS THAT WHATEVER WE DO UNTO THE LEAST OF THEM,
WE HAVE DONE UNTO HIM.

IN SPITE OF CHRONOLOGICAL AGE OR STAGE OF LIFE, WHEN ALL ARE
ENGAGED, THE BODY OF CHRIST CAN ENJOY A CERTAIN SYNERGY. THE WHOLE
IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF THE PARTS.

REGARDLESS OF SIZE OR EFFORT, WHATEVER WE DO IS NOT THE
BEGINNING.

GOD KNOWS US AND STILL CHOOSES US. LET'S CHOOSE GOD. GOD WILL
GIVE US THE WORDS TO ANSWER THAT CALL. AMEN.