

I was ordained to the transitional diaconate fourteen years ago, just about a half hour down the road at Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford. While it is tempting to want to tell you everything I think I have since learned about ministry, I am going to try to refrain from that exercise and instead offer you one piece of advice.

Laura, Barbara, and Jill: each of you have publicly professed before God, your bishop, and this congregation that you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and that they do contain all things necessary to salvation. And in a few minutes, each of you will be given a Bible “as a sign of your authority to proclaim God’s Word.”

Please don’t forget that pledge and that sign. It is so easy to become complacent about this basic dimension of ministry. And more than that, there will be enormous pressures on your time as a pastor—and it will be easy for you to convince yourself (or be convinced by others) that you don’t have time for prayer and study. Make the time, and open those Bibles every day! Otherwise it will quickly become way too easy to substitute your own opinions and cute stories and personal faith journey for God’s Word. (Or even worse, to steal *somebody else’s* opinions, stories, or faith journey off the internet!)

As you read the Bible don’t forget what you learned about it in seminary, but move beyond that. As you enter into the various worlds of the Bible, be willing to be changed as your own ideologies are re-framed in that encounter with the living Word of God. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Holy Scripture by praying the Daily Office. Become part of a lectionary group with people who will hold you accountable. There are no doubt other ways to find “success” in ministry and to make sure your HAC goes up. But I know of no way to be faithful to the risen Christ as an ordained person if you are not continuing to wrestle with the whole of Scripture.

In the end, even in a sacramental denomination such as ours, we are people of the Book. As preachers we have these ancient scrolls entrusted to us, and we are given authority to stand with God’s people and to share the good news that comes not only from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John but from the whole canon. (You did not pledge a moment ago to be a Marcionite who believes the four gospels and Paul’s epistles contain all things necessary to salvation! So read Lamentations. Read Job. Read Ecclesiastes. Read the Psalms. Read the Prophets.) Our great privilege and responsibility is to allow these texts to come to life in a time and place that is woefully ignorant of the richness of the canon of Scripture.

So there you have it. I’m sure there are others here who will have many other things to tell you today. But I am going to move on and try to practice what I preach (which is always a challenge) and move on to this ancient text from the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah. Perhaps all these years later there is a Word of the Lord there for us to discover, a Word that might speak to the challenges and opportunities we face as a community of faith in this time and place.

It is tempting to take shortcuts and to think the Bible is immediately accessible to us. It is tempting perhaps for you and all of us as we listen today to that first reading from the prophet Jeremiah to hear this text as if it has no context, as if it floats in mid-air. So that we move too quickly to a place where we can hear God whispering in your ears: *Laura, Jill, Barbara: I knew you when you were still in your mother’s womb...*

Now I have no doubt that God has known each of you from before your birth and has called each of you by name. But *this* text isn't *all* about you, at least not initially. And I think that an important kind of pastoral care we can offer to the people among whom we serve is to remind them that it isn't all about them, either. Entering into the world of the Bible is not unlike traveling to a foreign country. You can go to Europe in one of two ways. You can go as an ugly American on the lookout for McDonalds on every corner. Or you can learn something about the history and language and culture and enter into that world prepared to discover something new—not only about the place where you are traveling but also about yourself. You can be transformed if you first respect the differences.

The scroll before us is very clear in the first three verses that God is addressing a particular person in a particular time and in a particular place. As a preacher I continue to be amazed at how the Bible seems strangely unconcerned with pious platitudes and conventional religiosity. Rather, the God of the Bible speaks to particular people in particular places. And so the Word of Yahweh comes to Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah. Jeremiah is a “p.k.” in Anathoth, in the days of King Josiah, son of Amon of Judah—in the thirteenth year of his reign.

What follows is a standard Biblical call narrative. It begins with Divine initiative, which is met with human resistance. So God says to Jeremiah: “before you were even born I knew you, and I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations.” To which Jeremiah replies: “But I’m only a boy and I’m afraid of public speaking and surely there must be someone else...” That’s the pattern. God calls and Jeremiah says “no thanks.” But God is persistent. God responds with *rebuke* (“don’t say you’re just a boy!”) and *reassurance* (“don’t be afraid, I’ll be with you!”). And then God puts out his hand and touches Jeremiah’s mouth and commissions him to serve.

Now the lectionary committee chose to stop there in the suggested reading for the day, at verse nine. We get Jeremiah commissioned and that is apparently the end of the story: the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. That’s why we need to read the Bible, however, and not just lectionary inserts. The lectionary committee is not infallible. And sometimes they just plain get it wrong. I think that this is one of those occasions and it can lead us to bad theology of what our several callings are about. Jeremiah is commissioned *to do something*. He isn’t ordained just so he can wear the funny clothes. He is ordained to share with God in God’s work in the world—in his world six centuries before Messiah is born, among real people with real questions and real hurts and real dreams.

What is that work? Walter Brueggemann says that Jeremiah is “reflective of and responsive to the historical crisis of the last days of Judah, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BCE.” Jeremiah is commissioned to help God’s people enter into exile, where the old order will be dismantled and a crisis of faith will follow. It isn’t pretty. But it is not the last word. The thing is, it will take decades before another prophet comes along to speak a word of comfort, a word about new possibilities and a highway through the desert and homecoming.

The words that Jeremiah must speak are far less comfortable. His mission statement is found in the tenth verse of the first chapter, which we included today (I suppose in violation of some *Prayerbook* rubric). It’s basically just six verbs that encapsulate his entire ministry. Jeremiah is commissioned “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

These six verbs will keep appearing like a refrain throughout all 52 chapters of the scroll. It's the best kind of mission statement because it is short and to the point and oriented toward action. So 2/3 of Jeremiah's time is spent deconstructing the old order. It seems that has to happen before anything new will happen. And even then maybe the best Jeremiah will be able to do is to plant some seeds and build a little on the foundation.

*Jeremiah is given the hard task of helping people deal with loss and grief as the Babylonian army comes marching into Jerusalem and the temple comes crashing down. By the waters of Babylon the people lay up their harps—I mean how can you sing the Lord's song in a strange land? They are distraught. They are angry. They feel betrayed. They are bitterly divided. They feel they have no future. (Is this sounding familiar to anyone yet?)*

With all endings come new beginnings—but it takes time. This is language that is at the heart of who we are as Easter people, as followers of Jesus who have died with him in Holy Baptism and been raised with him to a new life of grace. That's the paschal mystery which is at the heart of this and every Eucharistic celebration.

Some have argued that the Babylonian Exile is as good a Biblical metaphor for the Church in our day as any and I think they are right. The old order of Constantinian Christianity is being plucked up and pulled down and destroyed and overthrown at this very moment. And that is naturally met with resistance. In the midst of our precariousness and our anxiety we draw old familiar fault lines between right and left. We try desperately to keep our old certitudes intact. We spend enormous energy trying to protect what we know. But what if those Constantinian structures have become for us a form of idolatry? What if God is still God, even among exiles in a foreign land? What is the new song we are meant to learn?

What would the Church look like—or what would any congregation within this diocese look like—if we lived as if we were truly prepared to lose our lives in order to find them? Even to lose the Church in order to find it. We are tempted to think that our job as Christian leaders is to stand with our fingers in the dike or to somehow try to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Trust me that temptation only becomes greater as you become more invested in the structures that we have in place for your livelihood. But what if our job as the people of God is to grieve loss when things change? What if our job as leaders is to share in the plucking up and pulling down and destroying and overthrowing? Think of all those times Jesus talks about pruning in the New Testament. Or about new wine and old wineskins. Because those old ways, those old patterns, those old structures can keep us from seeing and hearing the new thing God is doing.

Very few people will applaud that work when you do it because it is hard work and these are difficult times. I am not suggesting that the first week you arrive in a new parish you tell them you are there to pluck up and pull down and destroy and overthrow all of the sacred cows in that parish that are not in line with God's purposes. God help you. But maybe our work is easier than that. Maybe we don't have to be Jeremiah. Maybe we just have to remind people about who Jeremiah was and that there is a Word of the Lord for us, waiting to be discovered. Maybe we need to help the people with whom we serve remember those parts of the story that help us to navigate these times. Because ultimately this work is something we have to share together. It's not something clergy can order laity to do. I don't think Jeremiah would have ever gotten to the

second interview stage with any search committee in this diocese. But his words help us, the people of God in this time and place, find ways of seeing what God is up to in our time. They give us language to speak and hear so that God's people can find courage and wisdom for the living of these days.

I know that each of you are up to the task that lies before us. I know that the Divine initiative has been at work in your lives and that this call is "of God" and that it has been tested along the way by the Church. I know that along the way, like Jeremiah, you have perhaps found yourselves resisting that call. Maybe somewhere along the line as God called you even said, "But I'm only a girl." Or perhaps somebody else told you that. But thankfully, at least since 1976, we've heard God respond: "stop saying I'm just a girl..." (Personally, I think God was saying it a whole lot further back than that; we just weren't listening.)

*Call, resistance, rebuke and reassurance.* That is the pattern that brings us to this day. There is a Word here for us and while it is true that it is not *all* about you, this is about you and about me and about all of us who seek to follow Jesus. We *have* been called by name. You have already been commissioned by the Spirit in Holy Baptism to share in the work of the Church. But today you are invited to share in the work of a deacon, and eventually (by the grace of God and the people consenting) in the work of a priest. So in a few moments the Bishop will put his hands on your head and you will be surrounded by colleagues and made deacons. This is God's action through the Holy Spirit—no less than it was with Jeremiah.

There is another verse, though. There is work to be done. You are ordained to this time and place and to help shape the Church of the twenty-first century, and specifically this part of Christ's Body—this strange denomination of ours in this diocese that keeps plugging away at trying to be healthy and mission focused. I just want to say to you that this is a great time to be an Episcopalian! Yes, we live in unsettled times. So did Jeremiah. So did Blandina and her companions in second-century Lyons. So did Luther. If we are willing to look to their example and the example of so many others who have gone before us, we may well find more courage, more vision, more faith, more hope, and more love than we thought possible. Because it is in times such as these that saints are made. May our work together be about forming those saints, with God's help.

© June 2, 2007, Springfield, MA