

FEBRUARY 3RD, 2019: FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19 I Corinthians 12:31-13:13 Luke 4:21-30

Will the real Jeremiah stand up? Is he the prophet responsible for today's first reading or the prophet who composed those horribly depressing lines in 20:7-18? The two passages couldn't have come from the same person – or could they?

When hearing any biblical prophet's initial call from Yahweh, as we have in today's first reading, it's important to recognize that such narratives are some of the last things written in that particular prophet's book of oracles – often after the prophet's death. If we don't accept this in the case of Jeremiah, we'll easily misinterpret it, and never be able to reconcile it with chapter 20. Today Jeremiah is reflecting on a lifetime of being the conscience of the people. Through thick and thin he's finally certain Yahweh had called him to be a prophet even before he was formed in the womb; he's convinced he'd been dedicated as a prophet to the nations before his birth. But when he accuses Yahweh of tricking him to be his mouthpiece in chapter 20, and wishes he'd never been born, he's still in the middle of the thick and thin. It's one thing for a prophet to look at his or her ministry from a confident, life-ending perspective; it's a totally other thing to reflect on that life during the day by day encounters with evil that makes God's presence and assistance problematic. Each passage is Jeremiah speaking, each passage is true, but each passage was composed at a different point in his faith journey.

Much the same can be said of Jesus the prophet. Just a few weeks ago we heard a voice from heaven assure him, "You are my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased." Yet today he's forced to thread his way through an angry crowd to escape being killed. Not exactly what we'd expect from God's son. Why can't a divine Jesus just snap his fingers and the crowd disappear? Is God no longer taking care of his/her son? After all, he didn't do anything sinful. He simply raised people's ire by reminding them that God's actions aren't limited to just God's people. Certainly not a crime that merits a death sentence. Could Jesus also have experienced a Jeremiah 20 moment at that point of his ministry, but, for some reason, none of our four evangelists mentions it?

Any serious student of Scripture presumes the historical Jesus had many of those moments. Three of the four gospels narrate the best known of those occasions: Gethsemane. Yet we take for granted there were others, else the sleeping disciples who were with him that night wouldn't have realized what was transpiring. Such moments must have happened before, when they weren't asleep.

That's why today's I Corinthians pericope is so important. Only one thing keeps us going during those chapter 20 moments: love. Already in 8th grade I knew this passage was important because we were all forced to memorize it. But as I've gone through life I've continually discovered the depth of that importance. As Paul points out, without love nothing else matters. No matter our prerogatives or talents; without love, they're nothing. It's the only thing in our life that counts.

Recently I've suggested using I Corinthians 13 at funerals, not just at weddings. Though it's good to plan a future based on love, it's far more significant to be able to reflect back on a life already lived in and with love. For many of us, our love and God's love not only keeps us going, it's the one element that makes sense of our lives, especially in our Jeremiah 20 periods; when we can't figure out why terrible things are happening and we're tempted to "chuck the works."

COPYRIGHT 2019 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

FEBRUARY 10TH, 2019: FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8 I Corinthians 15:1-11 Luke 5:1-11

Regular readers of these commentaries will remember that I've mentioned Fr. Casper Deis before. He was my spiritual director in my first year of minor seminary. Though he was helpful on many levels, one of the main things I remember him telling us 13 and 14-year-old "kids" was that we shouldn't be afraid to tell him we wanted to leave the seminary. "I'll take any excuse you give," he said, "except one. Don't anybody dare tell me he doesn't want to be a priest because he's unworthy. If that's your excuse, I'll personally throw you out of my office, fling you down the steps and pitch you out the front door. Nobody's worthy to be a priest."

Actually, he could have gone further. None of us is worthy to carry out any ministry God gives us. Today's first and third readings take that for granted.

In the midst of Yahweh's majestic call, something suddenly dawns on First Isaiah. "I am doomed! I am a man of unclean lips," he realizes, "living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!" In other words, "I can't possibly do what Yahweh wants me to do. This must be a case of mistaken identity. God's going to be furious when he/she finds out the wrong guy intercepted this call."

But to the future prophet's surprise, Yahweh's already planned for his unworthiness. A seraph appears, touches Isaiah's lips with a burning ember and takes care of things. The reluctant man has no other choice. When Yahweh asks, "'Who will go for us?'" he can only respond, 'Here I am, send me!'" Obviously when God calls, God provides us with whatever we need to carry out that call.

Simon discovers the same thing in today's gospel pericope. This professional fisherman makes the horrible mistake of challenging Jesus' command, "Lower your nets for a catch." He basically tells him, "You stick to preaching; I'll do the fishing."

Amazed when the preacher demonstrates he's quite a fisherman, Simon ". . . fell at the knees of Jesus and said, 'Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.'" At that point, this itinerant preacher surprises him more than he did with the miraculous catch of fish. "Do not be afraid;" he says, "from now on you will be catching people." In one of the low points of his life, Simon's called to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. No talents to speak of, no accomplishment to fall back on, he can only trust in the person who calls him.

Paul of Tarsus reflects on something similar when reminding the Corinthian community of his own call. He lists himself among those who originally experienced the risen Jesus. But unlike the others, the Apostle classifies himself as "one born abnormally:" literally, one who was born when no one even realized his mother was pregnant. No one could have seen this one coming. "After all," he recalls, "I persecuted the church of God."

In grade school I learned that baptism removes all sins committed before baptism. Only when I started studying Scripture did I begin to understand how that total removal actually takes place. It has nothing to do with washing sin away. Baptism makes us new persons . . . just as the resurrection made Jesus a new person. Newly baptized don't have to confess those prior sins because they didn't commit those sins. A different person did the sinning.

Following that reasoning, I presume those called by Yahweh and Jesus also become new persons when they accept those calls. At that point they're no longer restricted by the old person's limits. No need for Fr. Deis to throw us out the door.

COPYRIGHT 2019 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN