

Dangerous Words from God
Jeremiah 1:4-10

February 6, 2022 Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

6 Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” 7 But the Lord said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
8 Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord.”

9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Methodist Pastor and Professor Will Willimon has a great story from when he was a college student in the 60s¹. He spent one summer in a small South Carolina town, helping register people to vote at a time when registering everyone to vote wasn't always a popular idea. And in that town the public schools that year were about to become integrated for the very first time. As you may already know, that was not well received by many in the white community. One evening, much of the local white population of that town gathered to meet at the high school. One by one, they spoke at a microphone:

“What was to be done to save our schools?”
“What could we do to keep them out of our schools?”
“How do we protect ours from theirs?”

¹ Will Willimon, *Stories by Willimon*, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2020, pp. 15-17

They called for a boycott. They called for resistance. Some called even for use of violence and force. After 30 minutes or so of racist tirades, anger, and people justifying segregation for the basis of “thinking about the children,” a hand went up in the back of the room.

It was the hand of an old Baptist minister. In this small town, he had baptized, married, and buried pretty much everyone present and their family members. As he called for the microphone, a sea parted in front of him, as all made way for him, their beloved pastor. Maybe he’d offer a prayer or a blessing or an encouragement, some must have thought.

As the pastor got up to the microphone, though, he paused for a minute looking at the eyes of everyone in the room.

And then, paraphrasing Paul’s words in Galatians 3:18 he said,

“There is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, white nor black, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, for there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism... Go home and read your Bibles!”

After a lengthy pause he continued on:

“Looking over this assembly, gazing at your faces, I this night have realized that I am the worst preacher in the world. If you think that anything in your faith justifies your presence here, that the sentiments expressed here tonight are in any way exemplary of the way of Christ, then I have failed miserably in my work as preacher.”

Then, he walked to the back of the room and slammed the door as he left.

That speech did not take place from a pulpit. Nor did it occur on a Sunday morning. But it may have been the greatest sermon that old Baptist preacher ever gave. It also, assuredly, was his most dangerous.

Hearing his words today, I’d want to give him a standing ovation and lift him out on our shoulders, and I hope most of you would too. But that’s not how that crowd would have viewed his words that night. Even with all the trust and history and respect they had for him before he spoke, I’m sure many in that room thought differently of him afterwards. And not all positively. He probably lost respect and admiration. He probably lost listening ears. He probably lost church members and worshipers. That often happens when the church stops being safe and comfortable and speaks up for truth and justice. He may have lost decades long friends. He may, in that small town, even have lost safety.

Willimon got to leave and go back to college after the summer, but that preacher had to stay and live and be a part of this community that he knows he spoke against that night.

The preacher could have played it safe. He could have never gone to that meeting and stayed home. He could have stood quietly in the back of the room. He could have said some generic nice words that hinted slightly at integration but never ruffled any feathers, something like “Let’s remember justice and peace.” But I don’t actually think the pastor could have done any of that. Because that night, he had a word from God to share. And God tends to make a way for dangerous words to be proclaimed.

That’s what happens in both of our scripture readings for today. Both Jesus and Jeremiah are given a word from God to proclaim that is dangerous and difficult, but needs to be said. Jesus, like the old pastor, has a word for his hometown. They want to keep Jesus here. They want to turn him into a miracle worker just for themselves. But Jesus came for more than that. He came for more than one town, more than one area, more than one nation, one language, one ethnicity, one skin color, or even one religious background. He came to show God’s love to the world, especially the people of this world most forgotten, mistreated, and left out.

Jeremiah’s message takes longer to express. It comes through the rest of the book. While Jeremiah is called as a child, throughout his ministry he wants to say no to it because he knows he isn’t called to give a nice, safe, polite, comfortable message, but instead the exact opposite. Most of Jeremiah’s ministry will be speaking to religious and political figures, telling them that they are getting it wrong. They are forgetting the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor. They’ve forgotten God’s ways and God’s justice. They have surrounded themselves with vanity and yes-men, and all the ways they are going is wrong.

Both Jesus and Jeremiah have messages that are true, from God, and based in love and in faith. But they are also dangerous words, because they are calling out the people they are addressing. They are doing what is most risky and difficult of all. They are telling people, “You don’t have it right.” And we as humans do not respond well to that message. We do not do well when someone says to us, “Actually, you have it wrong. Actually, you have hurt others. And I need you change and follow this other way.”

That remains today as difficult to say, and as difficult to hear as it was in Jesus’ day, in Jeremiah’s day, and in that old pastor’s day in the 60’s.

But what also remains is God speaking dangerous words of love and justice through ordinary, everyday people like you and me. God still wants to speak in and through us today to create more united communities, to lift up human dignity for all, to guide us in the ways of peace, justice, hope, and love. We all will have moments where we are called to speak up and say something dangerous. Maybe it will be in a conversation with a family member or friend, where we hear words of prejudice or racism or homophobia (maybe not meant to be, but still there), and we hear God saying to us, don’t let it slide this time. Speak up and share why it matters how we talk about all of God’s children.

Maybe it will be at an HOA meeting in your neighborhood where all are rallied talking about trying to keep out those new homes and neighbors that aren't as wealthy or educated, bringing down home value, tying up traffic, changing our schools. And you hear God calling you to get up and say, "Actually, as a follower of Jesus I am called to welcome these new neighbors with gratitude and love."

Maybe it will be in a couple months at the Nehemiah Action night with RISC where you hear a call to join with thousands of other people of faith and speak up. Speak up to people of power in our area about ways we can decrease gun violence, support affordable housing, and work for a safe and healthy place for all our neighbors to call home.

And maybe it's even saying it here at BAPC, maybe in a classroom or a committee, or even to your pastor, when you see something that is not right. Because I have to tell you I am going to get things wrong. I am going to make mistakes. I am going to sin. And I am going to need some dangerous words to be spoken to me, to help me remember God's voice of truth, justice, love, and correction.

Today's message is a challenging one for us. God's word is not always safe. It's not always comfortable. It demands at times for us to take big risks. Jeremiah was imprisoned multiple times for his preaching. Jesus was almost pushed off a cliff by people he grew up with.

But there is a big world crying out for God's dangerous words to be spoken. There is world that God loves and claims and wants to make whole. And the people of this world need the church of Jesus Christ not to stay so safe or comfortable any longer. But to be like that old pastor, to make our way up to microphone, and to boldly proclaim:

"There is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, white nor black, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, for there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism... Go home and read your Bibles!"

Amen.