

“GOD SPEAKS, IT HAPPENS!” Jer. 23:23-29. Proper 15, 14 August 2016

May we listen to the word, believe the word, and do the word! Amen.

Speaking of words reminds me of Humpty Dumpty. You remember the nursery rhyme, but Humpty Dumpty also was a character in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. There he said somewhat scornfully to Alice: ***“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”*** In the Old Testament reading today we hear from the fiery prophet Jeremiah. For Jeremiah there was a Word that was not so slippery and elusive: the Word of God. He believed God's word was true and had power – power of life and death. He faithfully spoke that word for over 40 years, and this got him nothing but grief and trouble! Jeremiah was an acute observer of people and society. The founding Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, once said that Jeremiah understood politics better than most kings. Jeremiah saw a nation in a moral and spiritual crisis, faced by both internal and external threats. He did what any good prophet would do. He listened to God; then he spoke God's word. He denounced civic and religious leaders and kings as greedy and corrupt. He accused self-appointed prophets of being false prophets and hypocrites. They sucked up to the leaders. They told the leaders what they wanted to hear. They assured them that God would always be on their side and protect them. No matter they chased after idols. No matter they led the people to abandon worship of the true God.

It's going to get worse, Jeremiah predicted, and then he spoke this terrible word of judgment: ***“Is not my word like fire, says the Lord? Is it not like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”*** Unlike Humpty Dumpty, when Jeremiah spoke God's word, that word meant what it said, it was true, and it happened! Babylon swept into Israel like a firestorm and hammered Jerusalem into rubble and carted the people off to exile.

If the story of Israel ended here, it would be a tragedy. But Jeremiah heard another word from God, a very different word. More about that later.

In our interconnected world of technology and social media, we are flooded by word, especially during the seemingly endless election season. So many words, given so many different meanings, that words seem to have been hollowed out. We also have as many fake prophets today as in Jeremiah's time marketing some of the same messages. They speak in smooth, enticing words trying to sucker us: ***Believe in me, I'll fix everything, I will make you a great nation again! We'll build walls and arm ourselves to the teeth!*** Our Bishop Greg is on to these self-anointed Messiahs who would divide us. He has passionately called on us to knock down walls that separate us by race, class, religion and guns. Last month after 10 days of unrelenting killing, he said: ***“[Our] society worships guns. And it is blasphemous and idolatrous. It has to change.”***

But how do we, a small group of faithful, help to change a society that is so polarized? Jeremiah had an answer. It is God's word that can rescue us and our nation from idolatry and redeem us as individuals and as a society. I worry, though, that the Humpty Dumpty rule of interpretation may have prevailed. That, for many, words no longer have any fixed meaning. That we can no longer count on words to be transformative agents. Is the word that for Jeremiah was fire and hammer so weak and irrelevant today that it is not strong enough to change minds, to change behavior, much less to transform society?

You know I like to quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Once he told a little parable: ***“When the whites came to Africa they said: close your eyes and let us pray. When we opened our eyes, they had the***

land and we had the Bible.” This sounds as if the Archbishop is leading up to a tragic ending. But he continued: *“The last thing to give to the oppressed is the Bible. There is nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more against injustice and oppression than the Bible. The Bible tells story of God biased in favor of the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed. God is biased up to his eyebrows!”* Speaking of the revolution then underway in South Africa, he concluded with this surprise. *“It is not our politics that inspired us, but our faith!”*

God’s word inspired tens of thousands of people of faith to peacefully march in protest, often from Saint George’s Cathedral in Cape Town. This was Archbishop Tutu’s cathedral and, incidentally, the cathedral where I was privileged to serve as Deacon. It was faith, inspired by God’s word, that helped bring down the evil, demonic Apartheid regime. God’s faithful people helped bring a new South Africa into being and to inaugurate an era of healing and reconciliation between the races. Jeremiah dimly foresaw this kind of positive outcome for his people and nation. For God spoke to Jeremiah not just a word of judgment, he spoke a word of salvation. Jeremiah predicted that God would bring his people back from exile, and they would replant and re-create a new land and begin an era of promise and hope. God meant what he said, it was true, and it happened!

Can we as people of faith help to spark a change in our deeply divided society? Inspired by our faith and the word of God? When William Stringfellow graduated from Harvard Law School in the 1960’s he did not go to work for a big Wall Street law firm. Instead he moved to a Black ghetto in Harlem in New York City and there he lived and advocated in behalf of the poor. Stringfellow was also a prominent lay theologian. Like Jeremiah he was utterly devoted to the word of God. For him the word was not flabby, malleable and passive. The word was strong and active and transformative. He wrote: *“In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word . . . Amidst Babel, speak the truth. . . Know the Word, teach the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word.”*

My brothers and sisters, we gather today to listen to the word, to believe, and soon to feed on the word. Then we will go out and live the word: feed the poor, heal the sick, comfort the grieving, and offer to all resurrection and new life. In the 151st year of our congregation’s history, let this strong word continue to ring out here at Trinity and Eighth Avenue and in all the places where we live and work!

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