

So I wanted to begin this sermon with a story that has almost nothing to do with anything. When I read Scripture, I often cannot help but imagine many of the colorful characters we meet within the pages as people I know. I cannot help but picture them as real people, people as real to me as can be. And when I read the book of Jeremiah, with the crazy eccentric prophet, I imagine him being very similar to my friend who shares his name. I met my friend Jeremiah on my first day of seminary, in the midst of an unbearable amount of get to know you questions. When I first met him, he introduced himself to a group of us, and we in turn introduced ourselves, when it came to me I asked him whether he was a bullfrog, and he responded that he used to be. So that's when I knew I met someone special. He spent the rest of seminary orientation wandering around with a compass in order to get oriented. Over the next three years, Jeremiah spent his time traversing around the seminary singing random songs as the came to his head, hitting tables to accentuate his point when he got over-excited, and being so impractical that I routinely wondered how he made it through the day.

Whenever I read about Jeremiah, this wild man led by the Holy Spirit, I imagine someone not unlike my Jeremiah. I find that it helps me to see him beyond the page, to see him not just as someone who spoke dry and lifeless words but as someone filled with passion, to see him as a man who would be led by the Holy Spirit to be a prophet to the nations, who was led by the Holy Spirit ever since he was in the womb to be the voice of God's word to the people. For me it gives life to the crazed man who would cry and wander naked, to help to see someone led by the ecstatic Spirit.

As Christians we are not always so good at remembering the work of the Holy Spirit, because it remains so unseen, so hard to describe. It remains a little vague. If asked to describe the role of the Holy Spirit so many of us would find ourselves floundering to find an answer.

There are plenty of Pentecostals who seem to have cornered the market on the Holy Spirit, claiming that it gives them visions, and allows them to speak in tongues, and I like most wonder if that truly is the work of the Holy Spirit. When you encounter clergy they will almost always talk about how they felt called into their vocation by the Holy Spirit, and when I talk about how I ended up in ministry I admit that it must have been the Holy Spirit because otherwise I have no idea how I ended up in ministry. And when churches and denominations make large changes they often speak of the Holy Spirit, while we all nod and wonder if there were any other motivations. But in our Old Testament text this morning, it is the Holy Spirit, which is moving in the life of Jeremiah, molding him to become the boy who would receive this prophetic call. In fact this is one place where we know we find the Spirit, it is one place where we are not stuck in vagaries but can point and say, we found it!

A few weeks ago we read the Wedding at Cana passage, hearing the Word of God speak to the servants, seeing the signs of Christ's glory. That was how John saw the beginning of Jesus' ministry, that was what John wanted to tell us about the Christ, but in Luke we find a different starting point. It is true, for Mark and Luke and Matthew, Jesus is baptized by John and then goes into the desert to fast and be tempted for forty days. But then their unity begins to unravel. For Mathew and Mark, Jesus begins public ministry after returning from the desert by calling His Disciples. But in Luke, there is a delay to their call. Luke tells us that Jesus' ministry began with an event that Matthew and Mark place much further in their Gospel accounts. Luke does not allow us to wonder if this change of order is random, because Luke tells us that Jesus was first led into the desert by the Holy Spirit, and led into the beginnings of ministry in the same way. These movements, this ordering of events is not random, even though sometimes it seems to be. Luke tells us that Jesus left the desert, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and

returned to Galilee, teaching in the synagogues where He was praised by everyone. As we read this we think, great, the Holy Spirit is leading Jesus to where He needs to be, preparing those who are about to encounter Him. After making His rounds through the region for an unspecified amount of time, Jesus finds Himself back in Nazareth, His hometown. The Spirit has led Him home.

When Jesus returned home, He went into the synagogue, and stood up to read. As the reader, we expect, we hope to find the teaching that Luke just alluded to, the teaching that amazed everyone. And we expect to find people amazed. We expect that the Holy Spirit has led Jesus here, for the same purpose. As Jesus stands, He is handed the scroll of Isaiah, He unrolls it and reads “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”. To us this sounds like a fitting mission statement for Jesus, led the Holy Spirit, He will bring good news to the poor, He will bring good news to us who are not just emotionally tormented, to those who are spiritually poor but will bring good news to the most vulnerable. He will free us from the captivity of sin and oppression we inflict on one another.

Maybe the Holy Spirit could have sat this one out, because this should be good news to the poor, oppressed people of Nazareth. Led by the Holy Spirit Jesus will proclaim the year of Jubilee, the year in Jewish Law, where slaves and prisoners were released, the year that land returned to the original owners, the year that debts were wiped clean. Led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus will proclaim the year of Jubilee that we continue to live in, the good news which does not just wait for you at the resurrection day but the good news which brings joy to the poor, and

captive today. Led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, who proclaims this good news, the one who makes this good news a reality by where He is going, by the cross.

After reading from the scroll, Jesus rolled it back up, handed it back to the attendant, and sat back down. And in case there was anyone who did not get it yet, Jesus announces to them that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”, these words which have been handed down to you, have been fulfilled today. And all of the people responded with wonder and amazement. This is the proper response for hearing this good news, this good news which they had been awaiting for so many years, the good news which is being said to the poor oppressed people of Galilee, to the poor captive people today. The response that is drawn out of us is wonder, like the wonder of the shepherds upon hearing the words of the angels or the amazement of Mary and Joseph when Simeon proclaimed the infant Jesus to be salvation to the Gentiles. Initially everyone in the synagogue shares in their amazement at the good news.

But, that is not the end to this passage. Luke goes on, the story goes on to tell us how that wonder soon faded. Quickly the people begin to ask themselves, is this not Joseph’s son. Suddenly their amazement gives way, their hope for something that is unlike anything they have seen or known gives way when they realize Jesus is someone they know. Jesus does not seem like the wonderful, Spirit filled, Christ but the poor carpenter’s son who seems too much like them, oppressed and held captive by fear and death. Jesus does not leave it though, He does not leave town. Instead Jesus goads the crowd, He tells them that a prophet is never accepted in His hometown. As we read this passage, we can understand it knowing that when we return home we are often treated as the people we once were, the immature teenager, the obnoxious child. But is that what Jesus is saying here? Is that what the Holy Spirit has led Jesus to Nazareth to say?

As Jesus continues on His, dare we call it a tirade, He reminds the congregation that Elijah only came to the widow in Sidon, and Elisha only healed Naaman the Syrian general who terrorized the people. Where they were led, where their prophetic calling led them was not among all of their people who rejected their call. Even when we look at poor Jeremiah, he was thrown into a pit in favor of prophets who were not so gloomy. The rejection that Jesus speaks of is not only among His hometown, but among His people. As the text continues, the people are filled with rage, as opposed to the Holy Spirit, and led Jesus out to a cliff so they might toss Jesus. But Jesus passes through them and went on His way. The conclusion to this passage makes us curious indeed, why would the Holy Spirit lead Jesus to this scene? What was the point of Jesus being rejected at the outset of ministry? Why would the Holy Spirit lead Jesus to a place where He would fail?

The truth is that many prophets led by the Holy Spirit failed, miserably and completely. Their words were not heard by those whom the prophets were sent to, and there is no bigger prophetic failure than Jeremiah. He was more emotionally invested, more dire, more eccentric than any of the other prophets we find, but we also find him having to witness his own failure. We find Jeremiah weeping over the exile of his people. Jeremiah, who God knew before he was born, who was led into his prophetic role by the Holy Spirit, failed. And many who boldly go into a new church mission, churches who feel called and led by the Holy Spirit fail. They get disappointed and wonder if they actually felt the Holy Spirit or deceived themselves. What we find in our passage this morning is Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit towards failure. Failure so complete, that they attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff at the beginning of His ministry. But Jesus simply passes through the crowds and goes on His way. The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into Nazareth when both know exactly what awaits Him, and both continue on knowing exactly

where it is Christ is going. Even as we find ourselves ready to be tossed off a cliff, we must continue to open ourselves to where the Holy Spirit is trying to lead us, trusting that sometimes this means encountering failure. But never doubting that the Holy Spirit has plans for each of us, that the Holy Spirit will continue to call and lead us.