

PENTECOST II

Proper 16 - Year C

*This Bible study was written by **Lucy Strandlund** for Proper 16 (C) in 2019.*

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴Now 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.”

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

⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

⁹Then 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.

¹⁰See, 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.”

Commentary from Lucy Strandlund

When I read this passage in Jeremiah, there is one line that immediately captures and convicts me: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (Jeremiah 1:6). Jeremiah’s response to God sounds so familiar. It brings to mind Moses’ doubts when God calls him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). Despite God’s promise to remain with him, Moses persists: “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10).

But Jeremiah’s response also sounds familiar because of what resounds in my own head. When I feel the Holy Spirit’s persistent tug on my heart, giving me work to do and an opportunity to say “Yes,” I instead reply, “But I am not good enough!” And then upon further reflection, I insist, “Are you sure? I think someone else would be better.”

There are many excuses we might give:

“I am only a girl.”

“I am not even a high school graduate.”

“I am too old.”

But judging from the Hebrew Bible, the job of the prophets is straightforward: to call attention to what they see around them and to draw people back towards God. This role takes courage and the gift of paying attention, but beyond those qualifications, God seems to desire only a willingness to show up as we are, ready to be a part of God’s work in the world. With these meager qualifications, God can do big things: pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant.

Discussion Questions

To what might God be inviting you to pay attention?

What gets in the way of you bringing all of who you already are to contribute to God’s work in the world?

Psalm 71:1-6

- ¹ In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; *
let me never be ashamed.
- ² In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free; *
incline your ear to me and save me.
- ³ Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe; *
you are my crag and my stronghold.
- ⁴ Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, *
from the clutches of the evildoer and the
oppressor.
- ⁵ For you are my hope, O Lord God, *
my confidence since I was young.
- ⁶ I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have been my
strength; *
my praise shall be always of you.

Commentary from Lucy Strandlund

In this short selection of Psalm 71, God is a refuge, a rock, a castle, a crag, and a stronghold. These concrete, tangible images lead the psalmist to the intangible—hope, confidence, and strength. And this sense of God's stability, steadiness, and safety means the psalmist can make demands of God: "Let me never be ashamed," "deliver me," "set me free," "incline your ear to me," "save me." The psalmist's experience of God since birth as a steady companion has created an intimate, trusting relationship in which the psalmist can voice their deepest desires with hope and confidence.

Discussion Questions

The psalmist uses "rock," "crag," and "stronghold" as tangible images for the safety and security God provides. What are some concrete images from your own experience you could use?

When you reflect on these metaphors for God, what might they inspire you to ask for—even demand as the psalmist does—in your prayer?

Hebrews 12:18-29

¹⁸ You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking, for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Commentary from Lucy Strandlund

From the tangible weight of Psalm 71’s metaphors we move to the mystical imagery of Hebrews, and yet there is still a theme of God’s steadiness. The author writes, “This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:27-28). Hebrews does not shy away from addressing human foibles and frailties, yet this chapter ends with an emphasis on “what cannot be shaken”—that is, the kingdom of God. When our worldly kingdoms seem battered by corruption, greed, and misuse of power, Hebrews reminds us that there is a kingdom very near us that remains, steady and unshaken. This chapter begins with the well-loved phrase “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) and is immediately followed by “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2). I take these bookends of this section as reminders that there are signs of God’s unshakable kingdom all around us, and for that I give thanks.

Discussion Questions

What signs of God’s kingdom do you see in the midst of our worldly kingdoms?

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day." ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water?" ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

Commentary from Lucy Strandlund

I cannot help but wonder about the woman in this story. She was bent over, unable to stand up straight for eighteen years. Eighteen years of getting around without ever being able to look someone in the eye, except maybe the occasional child or pet dog. Eighteen years of doing whatever work she could manage, and eighteen years of being overlooked by those standing tall around her. I imagine that those around her got used to seeing her that way—or maybe they didn't see her at all anymore. Maybe even she had grown accustomed to a life in which her eyes were perpetually cast downward. But Jesus sees her. He sees her with fresh eyes and immediately invites her over and speaks to her. With his touch, she is able to stand up straight, free and tall. It is nothing short of miraculous what truly seeing someone can offer to them.

Discussion Questions

As you go about your day, try to see with fresh eyes. What or who do you see that you might otherwise have overlooked?

Who could benefit from your taking a moment to truly see them?