

Jan 30, 2022

As I sat down to write this Sunday morning word for you, the beloved community, I listened to a melodic song aptly titled “Perfectly Flawed”. And yet, I heard no flaws in its composition, perfect or otherwise, but isn’t that how it goes with our human perception? We bear witness to perfect grace where the offerer sees only imperfection and inadequacy. In this way, bearing witness to grace is a subversive act, I think. Because to bear witness to grace in an imperfect world from imperfect actors is to be seeing with God’s loving eyes, or more aptly said in this case, as I contemplated what it might mean to be ‘perfectly flawed’, perhaps hearing with God’s ears. We receive love in surprising ways, not because we have struggled and successfully hidden our most profound shame, but because God, in the very mundane and brutal circumstances of living, cracks us open--exposes us so we might be witnessed. And in this ruptured vulnerability, there, love seeps into our fissures.

This is a true musing, I think. A crumb of bread for nourishment in the form of observation, but what has it to do with being called, with love, with prophecy, with being seen, or with being cast off a cliff, or being the one who rages and seeks to drive out the prophet? Let us explore, Dear Ones. Let us hope that God will speak to us today about just that very thing.

Let us begin in the Jeremiah text. This text has grabbed hold of me all week; wrapped itself all around in my insides... The specificity of it, the directness, the relentless and stern, unwavering love of God. There is nothing squishy here. Nothing airy or non-descript. Both God and Jeremiah are active here, in conversation: something is really happening, and it isn’t a mere metaphor. Most evident to me in this text is God’s revealing within the bounds of relationship; this is the common thread of our holy scriptures: God has a people and wants to be known by those people. Over and over again, God extends Godself to people so that we might know our Creator. So that we might bask in love without barriers and perhaps upon such revelry with the Stitcher of Galaxies, perhaps then we might mirror our discoveries about love, real love, with one another and with all creation.

Relationships are real. God wants to be close to God's people, and this cannot be accomplished without inviting us into relationship. With Godself, of course, but also with one another and with the Word. This is the pivotal importance of the prophet, the bearer of the Word. This is the setting apart, the consecration. It is not about the prophet being somehow "better". I mean, often, regardless of the magnetism or eloquence of the prophet, even though they are admired in one moment, they are usually despised and driven off or derided in the next. So the setting apart that is spoken about here seems to not elevate necessarily but makes a misfit of the called ones. The prophet is never really centred and is always speaking from a precarious edge. So the setting apart to me speaks about the big ask from God, both to uproot and tear down and build and plant: an action that requires both deep confidence and profound submission. The prophet must inhabit a razor's edge of neither belittling themselves and believing they are not good enough nor occupying a posture of arrogance which will place upon their tongue and hands words or actions other than those direct from Supreme Love.

Beloveds, this is a state of flow—a state of both receptivity and creativity. Perhaps, you have felt such a state for even a moment at a time, in deep prayer/meditation, or whilst dancing steps that become part of the music, moving as if fully embodied, of course, and yet freed from any sense of being encumbered. Perhaps you have met such flow in nature, basking in the majesty of the mountains or the vastness of the sea, or perhaps with a lover whose body dissolved into your own and in a place known *only* to poets and lovers; their flesh revealed to you, holiness. This is how we take glimpses and perhaps begin to understand the God who knows us so intimately. The God who knows the rhythm of your breath, the ridges of your pinky fingernail, the crease of your brow, the weight of your steps, the aches and quiet joys and wishes of your heart. And as God knows and calls the prophet Jeremiah, asking him to trust himself and to trust Divine Love, so too does God know and call you. Perhaps the call *is* to speak prophetically, but likely also, especially if we find ourselves amongst the social strata who tend to be regularly centred—to hear those on the margins who might offer a word that challenges our deeply held beliefs, our comfortable assumptions. How might what we expect to hear be turned upside down by a prophetic word? And will we, upon hearing it, build to a boiling rage like those in the synagogue? Will we be like those who, upon hearing Jesus

and not receiving our expected miracles, attempt to drive Love Incarnate, God Enfleshed off the nearest cliff? Or perhaps even worse, will we try to rationalise ecstatic mystery and God's profound calling to embrace it?

I don't know about you all; I am still new here, maybe I am the strange one among us, but the text this week makes my heart beat fast. I want God's hand on my mouth, on my life. I want God that close to me. When I pray, when I cry, when I rage, when I put paper to pen to write; I want God's hand upon my mouth, God's words stitched into my heart, thick upon my tongue, dripping from my pores, pulsing in my fingertips. That terrifies me, confuses me, delights me. This knowable yet, completely incomprehensible God wants to be in a relationship with me, with you, with us as a community. It makes me laugh. I downright giggled reading about Jesus telling the folks in Nazareth that sometimes heaven is closed, all the while knowing that God sometimes reaches right for my mouth, Jeremiah's mouth, your mouth. Sometimes, the thing you want from God you cannot have. Sometimes, often, in fact, the apparent good fortune of the guy down the road in Capernaum will not be yours, will not be mine. If you have lived on the margins as a poor person, a woman, an immigrant, a person of colour, a queer person: you don't get to rage about this every day. You learn to adapt. You learn to observe. You learn to cope. You learn to bear witness to grace in an imperfect world offered by imperfect actors. You learn to speak from a precarious edge.

My ancestors who were stolen, stripped of their families, land, culture and dignity to be sold as chattel; they persevered. And when they heard the gospel, they never heard it as if they were the folks in the synagogue, the elite who could have the luxury to drive someone who spoke an offence out of town. They heard it as a screaming wind through the deserted wilderness, a call to those in bondage, as a balm for the wretched from the mouths of oppressors—a gift wrapped in profound tragedy. The Word for them could be heard as ultimately subversive, as a challenge to the powerful, as healing for the oppressed. My teacher, Ray Aldred, who is Indigenous, always says, "we have not really heard the gospel until we hear it from another culture." I love that saying so much, I will probably stop quoting him eventually and just steal it for myself. It is dead-on for

me. I bring this up so that our community can consider how we might choose to actively, lovingly, honourably engage with prophets who might disrupt or agitate, who can speak into the gospel from underneath it and allow God to give us new ears to hear?

What if heaven *is* closed for a while to those for whom it has been open for so long? Will we still answer God's call if our expectations are not met?

These are questions that can only be answered, I think if we are deeply attentive to our relationship with God. We are God's people. Therefore, let us confidently submit, so we might take refuge there and become a sign to many. Amen.

Feb 6, 2022

I wanted to write 100 different sermons. I wanted to write you poetry. And then I thought about the thread between the scriptures today and I saw two strands that could not be denied and suddenly it didn't matter at all what I wanted to say--there, in a moment, I realised there was what needed saying. Today church, that won't take too long.

I notice today that both the prophet Isaiah and the disciples of Jesus stand in the presence of God with a decision to make about what their relationship with the holy will be. Isaiah, of course, sets eyes upon angelic beings. The text itself is magnificent: it is set in the place where earth and heaven meet, the holy of holies. Here, the prophet can see into God's celestial throne room. Here, Yahweh is so imposing that "the hem of God's robe fills the temple." This is certainly a place of awe, where the scale alone dwarfs the prophet.

God's hem fills the biggest building humans could construct at the time, this is how the ancient imagination pervieces this text. Imagine yourself today in a cathedral like St. John the Divine in New York or old Notre Dame in Paris to try to get a sense of the scale. In addition, God is attended by fierce creatures. These seraphim. These are not the chubby baby angels that appear on Christmas cards, but terrifying, burning, flying snakes, probably the size of sea serpents that are singing with loud, almost ear piercing, voices constantly proclaiming God's holiness and glory.

It is no wonder in this context Isaiah feels unworthy.

Now picture the disciples with Jesus. They're tired after working all night, and Jesus wants them to fish some more. They do come to say yes, but not before they tell Jesus that he's probably being ridiculous for even asking. I imagine this with an eyeroll and scoffing. For those of you who have raised children, you will recognise the incredulity that can emerge when suggesting to your child that you might have even the slightest clue what you are talking about. *"Sure, Master, I'll do it, but, like, we totally already did that."* *sigh*

The way I see it; whether we encounter God in a heavenly vision or in the banality of our exhaustion it is so easy to be unavailable in either circumstance. Both Isaiah and Simon Peter almost said no to God. One, out of a sense of unworthiness and the other perhaps from ego, from something as fleeting as annoyance. And wouldn't that have been so much easier to do? It has been said that our problems are not so complicated. Most of us suffer the consequences of thinking entirely too highly of ourselves or not nearly enough. And because we are interconnected, these sufferings are never just personal. Our estimation of who we are, of what we are capable of ripples outward into our families, our communities.

And isn't that humanity? Oscillating between a lack of self-esteem and an overabundance of it. So often trying to cling to our own little patch of comfort zone? Trying to convince ourselves and others that we are in control. So ready to tell God we'd rather be comfortable than challenged... that we'd rather understand fully than do some weird thing that's probably just a waste of time anyway.

And that is the second thread. We don't get it. We can't get it. The mysteries of the holy. The depth of our interdependence. Our own ignorance of the other. As Paul told us last week, for now we only see through the glass but dimly. But what we can learn from the scripture today is plenty, should we adjust our eyes to see. God can surprise and shock us; an encounter with the Stitcher of Galaxies could stun us into silence; and yet even when unclean we are still made in God's image.

It is interesting to note that the word for "unclean" in this text is not implying sin, but it is a ritual word that indicates that the prophet did not properly prepare for his meeting. This encounter seems to have occurred without warning. God did not text before she called. There was no opportunity to shower and catch some z's first. And isn't that just it? God does not wait for us to "get clean" before appearing. Jesus does not call our name only after we have properly napped and feel optimal. We are not likely to be fresh off our latest win in life when God shows up. I don't know if you have fished all night with heavy nets, I haven't, sounds horrible. But I can say that Jesus called my name is when I had the least reserves I have ever known. Nothing at all in the tank. I too almost said no. And I am sure you have too. But that is the wrong answer! We are

free of course to say no, our God is not one of coercion, but man we are so invited into the yes, so warmly welcomed into the relationship; the yes. Yes, send me! Yes, use me! Yes, I'll do the weird thing where I love the unlovable. I'll love the "me" you created me to be. I'll get back in the boat I was looking forward to getting out of to trust that fish will be caught and that by the simple act of submission, my life will be transformed. Yes, to love!

A common refrain today is one about the divisions we see in the world. The right and the left. Conservative and Liberal. The rich and the poor. White people and Black people. And on down the line. We all have remarked upon it whilst firmly believing we are right about everything and "they" who disagree are obviously misinformed and wrong. And maybe we are and maybe they are. But this doesn't sound like a path of liberation to me. It mires me. It doesn't make me feel freer. I do not believe that by simply observing what is wrong and staying comfortable in our "rightness" we become builders of the kin-dom. Injustice is real and the divisions are real, this is true. And we are called to do something about a lack of justice about divisions in the body. We are called to do the hardest thing in the face of that reality. We are called to transformation of ourselves. To love in the face of despair. To endure beyond devastation. To find the holy seed within us and allow God to water it. And then to turn that love loose on our neighbour. Church, let us allow. Let us say yes to the summons. May our chorus in unison be, "Send me". Amen.