

Jeremiah 8:18-9:3
1 Kings 17:8-16
“The Other Word of the Lord”

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“This is the word of the Lord.” Of all the things that get said in church on Sunday mornings, there is perhaps no line more comforting or startling than this one. “This is the word of the Lord.” I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about it before, why after the scripture is read, the next thing we hear said is, “This is the word of the Lord.” If you’ve ever attended other types of church services, then after hearing this, you may have heard the congregation all respond together in unison, “Thanks be to God.” In some traditions, this call and response has been around for so long—hundreds of years—that no one needs to be told what to do when you hear, “This is the word of the Lord.” You just know to say, “Thanks be to God.” When I first started preaching here a little less than two years ago, on my first Sunday in the pulpit, I read the scripture, and after I was done I said (just as I had been taught to in seminary), “This is the word of the Lord,” and I remember there was the sound of mumbling, followed by the sound of silence. I just figured it meant that around here we don’t say that. We don’t say, “This is the word of the Lord.” It’s not that we don’t believe in the word of the Lord, because I think we all do. I think that by just being here we are saying that we believe in the word of the Lord. That in a world of hopeless words, of uncaring words, of words absent of compassion and justice, we have come here in the certain hope that God has another word for us, a better word, a word from the Lord. Why it is the mantra of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, to say that God is still speaking, that God has not said all that God wants to say.

Some of you will remember Becky Albert. Becky started attending worship here not long after I did, and I recall, it was after her fourth or fifth week of being here that she told me she had cancer and that she did not expect to be around much longer. But she kept coming for another three months. If Sunday rolled around and she was feeling up to going out, she was here. Along with her husband and her two sons, she was here. Eventually she weakened so much that she couldn’t get out and she went to live at the hospice house in Providence. In one of my visits with her there, we were sitting around Becky’s bed. She was sleeping and her husband was telling me how it was that they came to show up in church at all. “It was Becky’s idea. Week after week, month after month, you’re getting all

these test results. Sometimes the word was good. Most of the time it wasn't. In the end, she went to church in search of a totally different word."

I ask you, what could be more appropriate to our worship and our service week-in and week-out then but to declare, "This is the word of the Lord." Not death, but life. Not fear, but friendship. Not prejudice, but welcome. Not greed, but love. And then to all say in joyful response, "Thanks be to God."

We don't tend to do that around here, though, and I'm sure one or two of you will come up to me after the service today and tell me why. I've been doing my own thinking about it this week, though.

Maybe we don't say it because we think it's a line that belongs to the Catholics or the Episcopalians or the Lutherans without also belonging to us. Because as a congregation of the United Church of Christ, we don't like to be boxed in, to say anything is just one thing. So, you'll notice in our services that we generally don't recite any creeds. We don't say, this we all believe the same, because we know we don't all believe the same, and we know that more important than belief is belonging.

When it comes to becoming a member in the church, you don't have to raise your right hand to say any pledge. You don't have to sign on any dotted line that you agree with all, or even any, of our teachings. We don't enforce a code of conduct. If there is anything that brings us together and keeps us together it is that we are congregational. That we believe God calls us to be together in mutual care and concern for one another. We say this about ourselves on the front of our worship bulletin every single Sunday:

"We are a people called together by Christ our Lord, in this time and at this place. Our ideal is a church of the open mind, the warm heart, and the aspiring soul."

And for all this, maybe we therefore don't say, "This is the word of the Lord." Because, well, how can we keep an open mind while saying, "This is the word of the Lord?" I mean, do *you* know what the word of the Lord is? How do you know it's not a different word that is the word of the Lord? And who are you, who am I, to decide what is the word of the Lord? What if, in hearing scripture read, you say, "Yep, that sounds an awful lot like God to me," while I say, "I don't think God sounds anything like that." And does God always have

to speak only from out of the Bible? We know that our Muslim brothers and sisters, who are also children of Abraham, read from the Koran, and that throughout all of Christian history, at various times and in nearly every Protestant and Catholic circle, there have been anywhere from 66 to 80 books that have been considered the word of the Lord. My point is this: if God is God, then what's to stop God from speaking from wherever and however God wants to? Doesn't the Bible itself say that God spoke out of a burning bush, out of the mouths of babes and infants, and even in silence once?

On the other hand, Friedrich Nietzsche once said that God is dead and no longer speaking at all. It's hard to say what exactly Nietzsche meant by this. More than likely he didn't mean that God is actually dead, but that God has been killed off. That with the Enlightenment, we began to accept less and less the existence of anything that couldn't be rationally proven and explained, and this essentially killed off all notions of faith and mystery, the very things which God stands for. We know, however, that some have gone so far as to wonder if God isn't really dead. Jeremiah. Called by God at a young age to preach judgement upon his own people for their wicked ways, to call them to a revival, Jeremiah tried to resist the call. Like Moses who came before him and Jonah who would come after him, he tried to ignore God, but we're told the word of the Lord just kept coming, like a fire in the belly that can't be put out. So, Jeremiah starts in to preach, and he preaches and he preaches and he preaches. Until one day, Jeremiah is standing in the land of Gilead surrounded by the consequences of his own preaching. The people have been warned, they have been humbled, they have been punished, and now Jeremiah wants to know if God has any more words for him to give to them? "Is there no balm in Gilead? No healing word? No word of mercy? No word that can restore us to life?" And God does not answer for a long time, and the people are forced to wait, and they wonder if God will ever speak to them again. Until one day, their great-great-great grandchildren are sitting in the synagogue when an itinerant preacher from Nazareth stands up to read a piece from the prophet Isaiah: "God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to those who have been held in waiting, to let the oppressed go free again." And all the people just sit there, thinking about how many times they've heard this piece of prophecy, and about how many times their grandparents heard this piece of prophecy, and about how long they have waited for someone to just make it true. When the

preacher from Nazareth looks at them and says, “Today, this word of the Lord has been fulfilled.”

At the same time, there are moments when the word of the Lord comes with such clarity of force that there is no need to give it more time. Elijah. His story is one of the strangest in all of scripture I think. It begins with, “And the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, go to Zarephath in Sidon and live there.” We know from reading other parts of the Bible that sending Elijah to live in Sidon would be like sending you and me to live in South Africa. Everything will be unfamiliar to Elijah—the language, the food, the religion, even the rocks. To complicate matters more, the people of Sidon do not like Elijah, because Elijah recently cursed their land with a famine. When their king, Ahab, was caught doing pure evil in the sight of God, it was Elijah who called him out, and when Ahab refused to change, Elijah called upon God to withhold the rain. Naturally, everyone is now hungry, including Elijah. God’s solution is to tell Elijah to go to Sidon and the village of Zarephath, and there you will find a widow who will feed you. But what’s a widow woman to do for Elijah? Ever since her husband died, she’s had no real income, which means she has no money with which to buy food. And even if she did have money, there’s no food to buy. The text is clear. She is down to her last two bits of bread. When Elijah meets her on his way into town, she greets him like a prisoner on death row. “I am on my way home to share a last supper with my son. We will eat it and then we will die.”

“I’d rather you give it to me,” Elijah tells her.

I don’t know but I think what the widow does next is to tell Elijah off.

“Give it to you? Because of you this little morsel, this little crumb, is all I have. How can you ask me to give it to you? Leave me alone that I may die in peace.”

And this is how the word of the Lord works?

To be honest with you, as a preacher and pastor, I don’t have the first clue how the word of the Lord works. What I can say is that if we want to hear the word of the Lord, we must first go to the people and places of great need and desperation, for it is to such people and places that the Lord wants to speak.

“Do not be afraid,” Elijah tells the widow in Zarephath. “Only feed me first and then feed yourself.” Is it greed that Elijah means to show this poor hungry woman or is it his faith in believing that as the Lord lives, no one will go hungry? That if there is enough food

for one hungry mouth, let there also be enough for two hungry mouths, and if enough for two than enough for three, and if for three than for four...

In his recent article entitled, "Jesus Acted Out the Alternative to Empire," Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes,

If you look at [the] prophets [of old], you can see...that they are without a pedigree. They don't have any credentials that legitimates what they want to say. They come from nowhere. They are people who do not accept the truth of totalism. *They refuse to believe that all is ever totally lost, and the way they articulate this is that they come at the world saying, "This is the word of the Lord," and this becomes a kind of a signal that this is a word that will not fit or accommodate the way things have been.*¹

So, here is our challenge, and here is your challenge Brandon, Olivia, Annie, and Mason: Go out and be prophetic today. Dare to do something that disrupts the world with love. Dare to speak up and say, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, and the word of the Lord has come to me. And it is a good word, a life-giving word, a healing word, and it is for all to hear."

¹ Walter Brueggemann. "Jesus Acted Out the Alternative to Empire." Published by Sojourners Magazine, June 22, 2018, <https://sojo.net/articles/walter-brueggemann-jesus-acted-out-alternative-empire>. *Italics is my paraphrase.*