

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴The LORD's word came to me:

⁵"Before I created you in the womb I knew you;
before you were born I set you apart;
I made you a prophet to the nations."

⁶"Ah, LORD God," I said, "I don't know how to speak
because I'm only a child."

⁷The LORD responded,
"Don't say, 'I'm only a child.'
Where I send you, you must go;
what I tell you, you must say."

⁸Don't be afraid of them,
because I'm with you to rescue you,"
declares the LORD.

⁹Then the LORD stretched out his hand,
touched my mouth, and said to me,
"I'm putting my words in your mouth."

¹⁰This very day I appoint you over nations and empires,
to dig up and pull down,
to destroy and demolish,
to build and plant."

Psalms 71:1-6

⁷¹I've taken refuge in you, LORD.
Don't let me ever be put to shame!

²Deliver me and rescue me by your righteousness!
Bend your ear toward me and save me!

³Be my rock of refuge
where I can always escape.

You commanded that my life be saved
because you are my rock and my fortress.

⁴My God, rescue me from the power of the wicked;
rescue me from the grip of the wrongdoer and the oppressor

⁵ because you are my hope, Lord.
You, LORD, are the one I've trusted since childhood.

⁶I've depended on you from birth—
you cut the cord when I came from my mother's womb.
My praise is always about you.

Luke 4:21-30

²¹ He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it." ²² Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?"

23 Then Jesus said to them, “Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: ‘Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we’ve heard you did in Capernaum.’” **24** He said, “I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet’s hometown. **25** And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah’s time, when it didn’t rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. **26** Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. **27** There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed.”

28 When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. **29** They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. **30** But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Sometimes, scriptures even make pastors nervous. Nervous because there's something fundamentally challenging, something meant to rattle the cages of the content, something meant to wrest us from our places of privilege. Today we hear that in these words. "Yet, Elijah was sent to none of them." None of the chosen people, that is. God Sent Elijah, but not to the people of Israel. None of the assumed insiders, nor the public religious hierarchy, were the intended recipients of God's first sign of blessing, of reprieve, from that terrible famine. Jesus tells us that Elijah was sent to the Gentiles, to those outside of God's covenant, and as if that weren't enough, to the poorest of the poor, a widow and her child on their deathbeds. That nervousness, it seems, arise from the tension within this text.

If you listened to last week's sermon online, or read the previous few verses here in Luke, you know that Jesus just introduced the year of the Lord's favor. After that, as today's reading says, everyone was *raving* about Jesus. They were excited about this proclamation! The idea that God's jubilee, God's deliverance from oppression, had come, was thrilling!

Then, the other shoe drops, as Jesus reminds the people that God's salvation, God's gift of deliverance, sometimes begins with the most unlikely of suspects, not with those who we might first suspect, and certainly not with the regular temple attenders, or even the regular church goers.

Now, it might be easy for us to assume that we're just the unnamed disciples in this story, the apparently innocent bystanders who watch as Jesus turns this synagogue on its head, nod along with approval, and then scurry away with him once the crowds become violent. But what if we

weren't? What if we were in this narrative, living life in the midst of this tension? Who are we in this story of God's presence?

Are we the crowd, first cheering Jesus, only to chase him out of town? We might be. We might be the ones who expect salvation, who demand deliverance, and who require it without delay. Like that JG Wentworth commercial, we might whine, "It's my salvation and I want it NOW!" Though we might not want to admit it, are we temperamental with Jesus, the work of God in our midst?

Or are we the synagogue assistant, handing Jesus the scroll, at first with pride as he proclaims this year of the Lord's favor, and then, after things begin to disintegrate, whispering under our breath, "What have I done?!?!" This wouldn't be one of the Pharisees or Sadducees, not one of the powerful or elite religious authorities. though they likely were in attendance as well. The synagogue assistant was

just that, an apprentice, wondering what can of worms opened when he handed the words of God to the Word of God. Are we confused with Jesus, the work of God in our midst?

Perhaps we are the religious elite, the Sadducees and Pharisees standing at the edges of the crowd and disapproving from the start? Like the medieval church gawking at Galileo's claim that the world revolves around the sun, are we afraid? Are we fearful that we've interpreted God wrong all along? Not that God was wrong, but that we misunderstood God. Are we somehow afraid of Jesus, the work of God in our midst?

Are we Elijah or the widow, the characters in the story that Jesus reads? Are we those people who've experienced the radical grace of God, the transformative power of God's presence, but for some reason can't give voice to that grace so that people will understand it when they hear

it? Elijah and the widow are separated by time from Jesus' reading to the synagogue. What separates our voices from letting people know that the change that Jesus brings is a blessed exchange of sin for salvation? Are we somehow silent in the face of Jesus, the work of God in our midst?

Are we Jesus' family and friends? Remember, this is the synagogue in his hometown. This is their church that Jesus is riling up. This is their tradition that he's challenging. This is their *status quo* that he's disrupting. Are we unsettled by the authority that Jesus claims, by the denial that he experiences, maybe even by the disdain that it might bring us as well? Are we not just troubled by the message, but that the messenger is someone we love? Are we ashamed of Jesus, the work of God in our midst?

Where are you? Where am I? I'm not sure. What I'm sure of, though, is that there is great tension here. Like the crowd, we might both rejoice and recoil at this message.

Like Jesus' family, we might both celebrate his presence and question his intentions. We stand in between poles, in the midst of the tension, and wonder what comes next.

One of the great gifts of Lutheran theology is that we believe God puts tension to God use, that God works in the midst of tension to bring blessing. Jesus is both human and divine, a tension. There is one God, and yet that one God exists as three persons, surely a tension. Scripture is God's perfect word written in imperfect human words, surely a tension. Even yesterday, as we gathered to mourn the death of Karen Ann Jameson Thompson, we also gathered in hope of the resurrection, perhaps the most poignant of tensions we experience as people of faith.

As we look toward the future, I imagine there's also some tensions that we live with as well. God's promised us favor, but we don't know what that looks like. There's a tension in the unknown potentials of the future. There's also

tension in that each of us likely has a different idea of what the best outcome, the best future, the best way forward looks like. There's uncertainties about our size, about our budget, about how we will live into our identity as a fellowship living and sharing the love of God through worship, service, wellness, and hospitality.

But do you see where Jesus is in the midst of the story?

Right in the middle of the tension. Jesus is present in the midst of tension, in the midst of anxiety, in the midst of question and doubt. God doesn't forsake us or abandon us in the tension, but walks the road toward resolution alongside us. Remember that Jesus too knows the difficulty of tension. He's the one who prayed to God, "Father, take this cup from me. Yet, not my will, but yours, be done," the one who, on the way to the cross, sweat blood because of the tension in his calling into God's future. Jesus knows this, and will not abandon us to face tension on our own.

Jesus already faced this future, leaving only death in his grave as he returned to life, and opened to us a host of new possibilities. This tension, rather than full of fear, is now full of the life of God, the breath of the Holy Spirit, the promise of new life. We face an unknown future, but we do know something about what's there: the promise of life is there. The presence of God is there. The breath of the Holy Spirit is there. The experience of resurrection is there. Whoever we are, whoever we feel like in this story, whatever tension we might experience, we know that God is with us in the midst of this tension, and in the future promised to us. God walks with us along the journey toward the promised land of peace, of resolution, of reconciliation.

In that light, let's consider a few questions: Where do we see connections between the tension in this Gospel reading and our own life experience? How does tension serve growth? What tensions are we experiencing right now

that God might use to develop our faith or form our community?

May those reflections work to shape us for God's kingdom and God's future for us. Amen.