

“Rescue, O God, from the hand of the wicked;  
from the grasp of the cruel and unjust.” AMEN!

I'll admit that I have a bad habit of trying  
to pull things out of the Bible  
that “Wow” you, the listener.

It's not the really about the practice of going  
into obscure places of the Bible that we  
don't often read,

but the temptation to locate new things  
in familiar texts just to impress you.

Acceptance is the first step to recovery, right?

Even pastors have bad habits.  
(in case you didn't know already!) :-)

My learning comes from reading and  
listening to other preachers.

Some might say that pastors shouldn't  
do that because the temptation  
to steal (or plagiarize) becomes too great,

but how else are we supposed to grow  
and mature if we don't take the form of

the student, now and then,  
and great teachings ought to be repeated.

And I've learned that it is more beneficial,  
healthy even, to be reminded of things  
we were taught than it is  
to struggle to uncover  
a secret meaning. (Pause)

One thing all pastors know is that  
you shouldn't return to the congregation  
from where they grew up.

I imagine myself going back to Salinas, CA  
to give a sermon at my Catholic High School. :-)

Some of the teachers who taught me long ago  
are still there and, if they were  
to remember me at all,

it'd be those memories of the times  
when I got into trouble!

Little Thomas, the wolf in sheep's clothing,  
who passed notes and misbehaved during Mass.

Classmates who knew the ways  
my teenage language was often  
profane and behavior was selfish.

It's not hard to imagine how the words of  
my sermon to them would get  
the resounding reply of

“Who does he think he’s kidding?!?”

Before they even heard me,  
they’d already decide they knew me.

So, it’s not difficult then to understand  
what happened when Jesus returned  
to his hometown synagogue.

Everybody knew him and we know  
that can be a problem,

if it shuts off their ability to listen/learn to him.

And the truth is, that it is possible  
to become too comfortable with the things  
that matter most (like listening to Jesus)

and become distracted  
by the things we think will “Wow” people.

The same ol’ things in the Bible still have true power.  
As the great teacher and preacher,  
Fred Craddock, said.

“The real power of the gospel comes  
from reminding the people of the God  
they already know.” (Pause)

The first lesson of this truth came in  
the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah.

Here are the words of Jeremiah’s call story.

In other words, what God did to Jeremiah  
to prepare him for his purpose.

Like most of us, Jeremiah tried to say  
he wasn’t able.

I’m not worthy!

“I speak poorly. I’m just a boy (or child),” he said.

We might add things like,  
“Yeah, but you know those things I did  
when I was young, God.

I can’t be that voice or presence of  
justice and peace you want me to be.”

We make excuses, too.

Jeremiah wasn't perfect. No one is.

Jeremiah wasn't fully prepared. Is anyone, really?

Yet, what happened to him, he interpreted,  
was both a preparedness and  
a goodness from God.

Maybe we can show a little grace  
to ourselves to know the same things.

Jeremiah recognized that what God was doing  
was a new thing, AND a planned thing;

a thing that he wouldn't be sent alone to do. (Pause)

Beloved, what sort of things might  
we accomplish if we took God's words  
to Jeremiah into our hearts?

What sort of new ministries might God calling us into?  
The unused Sunday School building...  
what if that was turned into a ministry  
for St. Stephen.

Converting the building or building a new one  
to created efficiency space for people in  
the congregation facing shelter challenges;

making it into a multi-purpose room  
for youth to hang out.

We can be talking about the many groups  
who utilize our fellowship hall room.

It's also a space that needs renovation  
as we outreach with others.

How might we open our wallets and  
give the resources God has blessed us with  
to embrace those new ministries?

What sort of response would we have  
when God whispers into our ears and says,

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you  
to deliver you.” (Pause)

Last week, we celebrated  
Ministry of Reconciliation Sunday and

enjoyed a message from Jonathon Webber  
from The Southern Poverty Law Center.

We heard a passionate advocate and  
we were inspired by his message of hope  
and presence.

How showing up is important and  
how advocacy, that is, speaking up  
in objection to law-maker's unjust policies

and/or speaking in support of those  
who are oppressed and locked in  
the cycles of poverty  
makes positive differences.

"Do not be afraid. You are capable," God said.

And you and I are capable.

We simply need to not be afraid because  
that's what they want us to be.

Hopeless and afraid. (Pause)

You see, Jesus didn't go home to teach  
his hometown that God had given up on them.

He went to remind them that God doesn't  
give up on humanity.

The anger they had toward Jesus came  
when he reminded them that the prophets  
were often called to assist, heal, and  
protect people who were sometimes on  
the outside of Judaism.

The hometown thought Jesus was saying  
they were being replaced or rejected, but

God really said, “You are not being replaced (rejected),  
but others are included.” (Pause)

I’ll also remind you that last week we agreed  
that people see Jesus from different angles?

One of Luke’s angles is to see Jesus as a prophet,  
like Elijah and Elisha, who walked difficult  
and challenging paths that extended  
the work of God beyond particular tribes,  
and communities, and regions...

and even beyond religion.

When prophets proclaim Godly truths  
we will always find that some people  
will be happy and some people will be angry.

The word of God pulls down, critiques,  
destroys, and plucks up.

The word of God also resurrects and builds.

The word of God plants new learnings in us  
to share and deliver.



It says that right there in Jeremiah.

Too many people in our faith, and other faiths,  
want to say that God is only active/supportive/  
loving to their specific group.

We, however, stand up to say that God  
is active/supportive/loving (and present)  
in the ALL people and all places. (Pause)

When the Gospel of Luke proclaims to us that  
Jesus was a prophet like those of the OT,  
he wants us to know how scandalous  
it is to read those words.

He wants us as a community to reflect on  
how outrageous it is that Jesus' comforting words  
are also disturbing truths.

God's Word makes us happy and it can  
make us really angry because it's  
quite comfortable to believe we've learned  
all we need to learn and it is

affirming to think that the way we've always  
done it before is the best way to keep doing it.

It's a nice way to coast,

but coasting is never going to  
challenge us and grow us. (Pause)

After service we will gather together at  
our Congregation Meeting to discuss  
necessary things, make decisions,  
vote for people and make financial plans  
for 2025.

Let's remember Jeremiah's call story when  
fear of the unknown tries to rise up  
during the meeting.

Let's remember to not be afraid and know  
we are capable, for God is with us and  
will deliver us.

Let's remember that ministry, that is,  
living life in ways that reflect God's presence  
in all people, drives our tithes and  
contributions.

Fear, guilt and hand-wringing never do. (Pause)

Paul's words in his first letter to  
the Corinthians said it best.

Being rude, boastful, puffed up, irritable,  
resentful and celebrating when we get away

with wrongdoings is never the way of Jesus.

What is the way of Jesus is letting him invite  
into us the kind of love that is  
difficult and challenging.

We probably all know the people who are gifted,  
but don't know how to love.

What we may not know is that people  
sometimes know how to love but  
don't know how to use their gifts.

May we see this truth face to face and  
not be afraid of the path God has for us.

AMEN!