

January 31, 2010 – Jeremiah 1: 4-10; 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13; Luke 4: 21-30

## **THE WORD OF GOD ON YOUR LIPS**

In the movie *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen Prejean becomes the spiritual advisor to a convicted murderer and rapist, Matthew Poncelet. The movie documents the conversation and interaction of these two characters while providing glimpses into the history that led them to where they are now. I have seen the movie a couple of times – it is a powerful story of evil and remorse and repentance and faith. When I watched it the first time I remember being impressed by the work of Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn in the leading roles as I was caught up in the compelling relationship that evolved. But is the second viewing of *Dead Man Walking* that I remember most vividly...

I was at Vancouver School of Theology and a small group of us gathered in the old boardroom one night to watch a movie. I was looking forward to seeing it again and talking about it with those who were about to see it for the first time. The movie began – the lights dimmed. And as we got into it I began to panic – as I watched Sister Helen compassionately reach out to the disturbed man on death row I became overwhelmed with the realization that since I was studying and preparing to become a minister of word and sacrament, this was no longer an academic exercise for me – someone could expect me to serve in the same way. Someone like that could call upon me to be their spiritual director – someone could need me to be that compassionate – that rooted in faith – that forgiving. Suddenly – and perhaps for the first time – I recognized the enormity of what I was getting myself into and like Jeremiah I suggested to God that perhaps someone else would be better suited to the task!

Not long after that – maybe a year later – I was standing in the sanctuary of Dayspring Presbyterian Church in Edmonton. It was nearly 8:00 in the evening, November 11, 2003. The room was not quite full – my family and friends were there – and I was in the front facing my friend and mentor, The Reverend John Dowds. It was just moments after clergy in the Presbytery of Edmonton-Lakeland had laid hands on me and ordained me to the ministry of word and sacrament. Now I was to remain in front as I was offered words of wisdom in the form of a charge from John.

He said, "What are you doing Laura Kavanagh? What are you doing with the word of God upon your lips?"

He said other things of course – I know because I read them later in the copy of the message that he gave me – but at the time it felt like everything fell away as he spoke those first words. Time stopped – the congregation disappeared – John's lips moved but I heard no more – and I wondered as I stood there in fear and trembling, "What am I doing? Soon they will all discover I am an impostor –

not fit to speak. What was I thinking? I have no right to presume to speak the gospel – this is too much.”

I snapped out of it by the time the prayers were spoken and I was called upon to offer the benediction. I smiled and had my picture taken and thanked people for their support and encouragement and acted like I was just fine. But I will never forget that moment when I realized the enormous responsibility of putting the word of God on my lips.

I completely understand why Jeremiah is not so keen to do what God calls him to do. What catches my attention is that God says: *Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.* In other translations this is written as *I am with you to protect you* or *I’m with you to come to your rescue.* Deliverance? – protection? – rescue? Just how dangerous is this word of God? How much risk is really involved in proclaiming God’s message?

Look at what happens to Jesus when he reads from the prophet Isaiah – rational people sitting in worship become an angry mob ready to run him out of town on a rail!

Jesus reminds his listeners – some of whom are impressed that this local boy has done so well and others who think he might just be forgetting that they were there when he was a lad in short pants – he reminds them that no prophet is accepted at home. He reminds them that when Elijah spoke the word of God there were lots of needy people in Israel during the desperate drought and famine throughout the land. And he reminds them that Elijah went instead to help out some foreign widow in Sidon at Zarephath. Jesus also brings up the situation of the prophet Elisha who sent Naaman the Syrian to be healed of his leprosy even though there were many lepers in Israel at the time.

Jesus doesn’t speak God’s word to win over any friends! He has the word of God on his lips and it is a dangerous thing – confidence shaking – long-held-belief challenging – life threatening. Jesus speaks the gospel and people try to throw him off a cliff! Why would anyone agree to the word of God in their mouth when it is so risky? Why would Margaret agree to stand at the lectern and read the words of God? Why would I offer my reflections? Why would any one of us tell a soul the message of God?

Don’t think it is only ministers of word and sacrament who have God’s word on their lips. Clergy have no corner on the God market – no exclusive right to the word of God and the message of the gospel. Every one of us can stand with Jeremiah wondering if we are fit for the task but the truth is that everyone of us is called to put the word of God on our lips and in our lives despite the danger. My experiences of realizing the power and responsibility of preaching the gospel and walking with others in the dark and light of life may have come during my journey of discernment for ministry but that is only because I had not truly understood

what it was to be a believer until that time. We are all part of the priesthood of God – all invited to read and proclaim the gospel – all susceptible to the risks of announcing the good news of Jesus Christ.

My own experience and the experiences related to us in the call of Jeremiah and the preaching of Jesus in the synagogue make it clear to me that the word of God is not for the faint of heart. It is meant to unsettle and challenge and disrupt the way that we think of things. It is intended to *pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant*. It is intentionally inciting – causing those who hear it to react – with rage and with amazement. It is an ominous responsibility to accept the word of God and to put those words in our mouths and on our lips.

There are three things I want you to take away with you today – to reflect upon – to gain strength and hope from – to live out as fully as you can...

First, realize that everytime you open your mouth you have the opportunity, the responsibility and the challenge of speaking the word of God. Not only that but your actions will always speak louder than your words.

Second, remember that the crowd may well turn against you as it turned against Jesus and you may have good reason to be afraid as was Jeremiah. You might doubt your call to speak and your resolve in caring for others. But remember that no matter what, God has promised to deliver – to protect and to rescue – to keep you safe in the midst of danger.

Third, think about the power of the word of God as you speak it and live it. The word of God is more than just a little bit dangerous. If we are so comfortable with the words we read and hear from scripture then perhaps we are not really hearing them any more. If the gospel never challenges what we hold as true and never causes us to question what we think we know then my guess is that what we are hearing is not the gospel at all but some pale and safe imitation. If the word of God never pushes you to stand with fear and trembling or to rage against the injustice of this world or to gaze in wonder then is it really the word of God?

**Amen**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2010