

Sermon 8-23-25

Paul Purdue preaching

My sister-in-law grew up in a church that referred to Halloween as the Devil's Birthday Party. My home church was more liberal, as we tolerated Trick-or-Treating while promoting an alternative fall festival. That church that raised me, hired me as the Assistant to the Youth Director at age 19, Youth Director at age 20 and Director of Youth and Recreation before I turned 21. As Recreation Director, the fall festival landed on my plate. When a few new families asked if children could wear costumes to the fall festival, we added a "Hero's of the Bible" costume contest. For my costume, I sewed craftstore leaves onto a red shirt and ballcap, painted on flames on the shirt and was feeling pretty good about my Burning Bush costume until someone quipped, "*So you decided to come as the very Voice of God.*"

As Youth and Recreation Director I had to write a weekly newsletter article about upcoming events. Perhaps bewitched by a Focus on the Family Magazine article, I decided to write about the spiritual dangers of Halloween. Maybe some self-doubt led me to share my thoughts with Connie. In 39 years as a couple, Connie has rarely offered any critiques of my theology, teaching or preaching. She has missed some opportunities! However, when I shared my thoughts about the spiritual dangers of Halloween, Connie immediately spoke up, "*Paul, You can't come out against Halloween. Think about being a kid dressing up! When else can you ring your neighbor's doorbell and know they will give you candy? You can't come out against that!*"

I had Bible verses ready to battle dollarstore devils and wax vampire teeth, but Connie's words stopped me in my tracks. Her words resonated deep in my spirit, wooing me away from a tide of binary Bible-idolatry that labeled everything as either Christian or bad. In 1988, I was listening to a well-organized Christian-radio machine that trumpeted literalism, easy answers, and harsh judgements. Connie invited me to look at the world through a different lens, to see beauty instead of imperfections, goodness amid the greyness, righteousness over wrong-ness, love over judgment, freedom over legalism, and blessings over curses. When you hear something holy, lovely, compassionate, beautiful, excellent, just and humane the words should slow us down. God may have put a word in someone's mouth. When the word of God comes to us it changes our perspective, alters our plans, redirects our paths, builds us up and heals our even undiscovered broken spaces. The Apostle Paul tells us to dwell on "*whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is beautiful, whatever is commendable, what is excellence and what is worthy of praise!*" (Philippians 4). Friends, I heard a word from God in Connie's words. Now, Halloween is getting weirder and creepier, but it gives us a chance to love our neighbors, greeting them with little Snickers bars and Sour Patch Kids, or like a dentist friend of mine does with little toothbrushes and Sparkle Crest.

The Book of Jeremiah begins with an introductory superscription filled with tricky names that the Lectionary skips over. Jeremiah verse one chapter 1 begins "*The words of Jeremiah, the son of a priest from the land of Benjamin*". Verse one tells us who wrote the

book of Jeremiah: Jeremiah and maybe some later Jeremiah disciples wrote the book of Jeremiah. *“These are the words of Jeremiah.”* But look at verse two, which adds *“to whom the word of the Lord came.”* Put those lines together in your mind: underline them in your Bible: *“The words of Jeremiah... The word of the Lord... the words of Jeremiah: the word of the Lord.”* The book of Jeremiah contains both *“the words of Jeremiah... (and) the word of the Lord”*. How can Jeremiah’s words be both the words of Jeremiah and the words of the Lord? Did God possess Jeremiah’s mind and guide every word of his stylist? I do not think so. Friends, this superscription is messy, mixing together *“the words of Jeremiah... the word of the Lord”* but this messiness is deeply incarnational, deeply human, deeply divine, a deep intersectional confluence reminding us that God is with us.

I always am a tad skeptical when someone says *“God told me...”* but that is not exactly what Jeremiah writes. Jeremiah writes, *“Now the word of the Lord came to me saying”*. Like Moses and Mary, Jeremiah pushes back against speaking for God. Jeremiah protests *“Oh Lord, My God! I do not know how to speak.”* Perhaps, anyone speaking for the Lord needs to speak with a reverent uncertainty. Maybe all prophetic speech begins *“God, I do not know how to speak”*? In First Corinthians seven, Paul writes *“And I think I have the Spirit of God on this (issue) too...”* (Chapter 7). Paul also writes, *“we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part”* (1 Corinthians 13). I am pretty certain, Connie did not think she was speaking for God, but I heard a word from God in her words. It was the community of faith that heard God speaking through Jeremiah’s words and named the Book of Jeremiah as part of the many *“Words of the Lord”* recorded in Scripture.

The Superscription grounds Jeremiah’s words in a particular historical moment, a moment scholars note was *“a tumultuous period of Judah’s history, from one of its greatest moments, the reign of King Josiah (who led a religious revival and reformation) to its lowest moment, the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of many to Babylon.... These were among the most important events in the history of ancient Israel.”* The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary warns us *“these words ...may not always be easy to hear or comprehend. The historical character of the material carries with it a strangeness that the reader needs to feel because it is there. The prophets’ world is strange to us in many ways. We cannot simply re-create in our minds what life was like two and a half millennia ago in that small Mediterranean land... The task of interpretation (hearing a word from God) must take such strangeness into account. ... (but as Scripture) the words can connect with (people in) later times and places.”* My story of church sponsored alternatives to Halloween may be so foreign to you, that Connie’s words feel more like common sense than a message from God, but if you step inside my story the world of God may come to you. If we are disconnected from the history and story of the community of faith we will often mishandle and misuse the Scripture. Yes, despite the risky strangeness, the Spirit of God is still speaking through these words of Jeremiah. We hear words from God in these ancient words, but without the Holy Spirit, our open human minds, and the community of faith the words of Jeremiah become ancient poetry to argue about. In Romans 8, Paul tells us that it is the Spirit of God speaking to our human spirit that tells us we are children of God. That is messy, incarnational and Biblical.

Article 4 of our UMC Confession of Faith states: *“We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God... It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice...”* <https://www.umc.org/en/content/confession-of-faith>

God says to Jeremiah *“do not be afraid for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ... Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and I appoint you to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”* Who will speak when the Temple and the palace lie in smoldering ruins? Jeremiah will speak! Who is appointed to pluck up, pull down, knock down and overthrow? Jeremiah! Who will build up and plant anew? Jeremiah. The community of faith heard the word of God in the words of Jeremiah and named the words of Jeremiah as the word of God. It is a deep and beautiful incarnation, incarnational and Biblical. God is with us and still speaking.

Who has spoken a word from God to you? Before I could speak, I heard words from God in my mother's sing-song delight as she held my tiny frame in her arms. With her dowdy hair, thick glasses, long out of fashion dresses, slow movements and gentle words, Mrs. Rose Mckee made me feel safe enough to hear the Word of God in Sunday School, when struggling to read, I sometimes made myself physically sick to escape Monday to Friday school. As a junior at the University of Kentucky, tipped off by a history lecture, the word of the Lord has come to me many times over and over again through my now 39 year old copy of *“A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings And Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.”* And in my senior year of college, when my Biblical literalism was crashing down around me, almost sweeping away my faith, the word of the Lord came to me in the words of Dr Christopher Nugent as we walked across the university commons on a blustery December day. We were talking about my becoming a professor of history or cognitive psychology so Dr Nugent's words startled me *“Paul, do not give up on the church just yet, you may have the timber of a pastor.”*

In Ephesians 4:29, the Apostle Paul, a very human, very imperfect writer, encourages us: *“Let no evil (unwholesome, harmful, or worthless) words come out of your mouths, but say what is useful for building others up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”* Yes, God used Jeremiah's words *“to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant”*, but God's final words are always aiming to build up and plant anew. God is still speaking, your words can offer grace. Let us stay so in love with God with one another that grace seasons our words and who knows, perhaps someone might hear a word from God from something you say. Amen.