

HERE I AM: NO MATTER WHAT

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Based on Jeremiah 26:1-15 and Mark 14:53-65

If you've been here in recent weeks, you know that today's sermon is the fourth in a series of sermons on the passages of the Bible in which the phrase, "Here I am," comes up, as it does with some regularity and some significance. We've talked a couple of times about different ways in which the beloved characters of the Bible are called upon by God, some directly, some through other people, and how the character somehow finds the courage and the faith to respond to God's call. I hadn't planned on the ordination and installation of new officers when I imagined this series, but apparently the Holy Spirit was in that process. Because our new officers too have heard God's call, in one way or another, and despite any doubts or fears they may have had, they have managed to say, "Here I am. I'm going to try, I'm going to give, I'm going to do, I'm going to let God stretch my limits. Here I am, Lord," they have said, "to do the work of your church, I pray that you can work through me." Today's reading is the other side of that "Here I Am" coin. In the reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we hear the prophet saying--not to God, but to the people who listen to Jeremiah's message—"Here I am." Because the people don't want to listen to Jeremiah's message. They don't want to hear what God is telling them through the prophet. And this is the rest of the "here I am" story—God gives us a call, asks us to do something, God gives us a message, and we are to deliver that message, heed that call, no matter how people around us respond, no matter whether we're loved or despised, no matter what. It's one thing to answer, to say yes, in a moment of clarity, or in a moment of weakness or simply because you don't want to disappoint Libby Dalrymple or the other members of the nominating committee. That's huge, that yes, that "here I am"—it opens a door. But then we have to walk through the door, and we have to keep on walking—when it's sunny and warm and a romp in the park--and when it's sleeting and cold and involves playing mini-golf in 30 degree weather, as on yesterday's confirmation retreat. God's call is a gift that keeps on giving—and it's our gift that keeps on giving—no matter what. The people who hear Jeremiah's message, given to him by God, would like to kill Jeremiah for it. They don't want to hear any warning, they don't want to hear about what will happen if they don't change their ways. They just want Jeremiah to stop talking. Jeremiah responds in his turn—you want to kill me? Well, here I am, do what you want. I still have to say what God told me to say.

The scene reminds me of Martin Luther, a story that many of you may know. Luther had been writing for some time and preaching and teaching, against corruption, and toward the idea that no human action can guarantee our salvation, that our salvation is entirely in the hands of God. He was brought before the civil authorities, interestingly—not the pope, but the Emperor Charles V—who asked him to recant, to take it all back. But Luther, who had never really intended to be a revolutionary, still could not claim to believe things that he did not believe, and he could not deny believing what he knew to be true. So instead of recanting, Luther gave a speech that ended with the famous sentence—"here I stand. God

help me, I can do no other.” God knows, he was saying, it would be more convenient to believe something else. But here I stand, where God has placed me, no matter what.

Maybe even more poignant is the story of Galileo—and this one is probably more legendary than historical. Galileo was called before the inquisition on charges of heresy—this part is historical—and told to confess that contrary to the theories of Copernicus, contrary to Galileo’s own research, the earth must be the center of the universe, as the Bible was understood to say. Sadly, unlike Luther, Galileo did recant. He did deny the truth of his own research, assuring the authorities that the earth was the still point of a turning universe. But legend has it—and maybe in the legend we make Galileo a little bolder than he really was—legend has it that as Galileo turned away from his inquisitors, he muttered under his breath, “And yet, it moves!”

It’s sad to imagine confessing the opposite of what we know to be true, putting aside our God-given intellect, our logic, or in other situations our instinctive compassion, our God-given empathy, simply to save our own lives. But of course, it has happened innumerable times over the centuries. People get excellent ideas, they have deep insights and compassion beyond what their own culture allows. And then an authority with the power over life and death swoops in, or the culture tightens up its restrictions, fear is instilled, the way it’s always been done bears down, and the God-given thing that was beginning is squashed.

When God calls us, when we hear God say our name, turning us in a certain direction, that call does not mean that what we are called to do is going to be an easy path or even a clear path. Chances are we will meet with opposition, with resistance. God calls us to do things that are not easy. If it were easy, we wouldn’t need to be called to do it. Rarely does God call anyone to eat some homemade brownies, for example. I know that because I have been attentively waiting for that particular call, but it has not yet come. I have felt called to bake a pan of brownies for someone else, or to share my one little seemingly insufficient brownie with a friend or a stranger. But I have yet to be called to eat the whole pan on my own. I have my own desire to do that, so why would God waste the divine breath? God calls us to do the difficult stuff, the things our body does not crave, the things our society does not praise, the things that sometimes hurt and sometimes just seem weird. If it got you lots of praise, if it seemed perfectly normal, if it were as tasty as chocolate, God wouldn’t need to make the call.

Despite everything the people threaten against him, Jeremiah has to go ahead with the message God gave him. Nevertheless, he says, despite all your reluctance to hear, despite all your threats against me, here I am. Standing where God told me to stand, no matter what.

I’ve been thinking about St. Francis lately. The new pope took St. Francis’ name, which I must say seems like a good sign. St. Francis is said to have heard Jesus telling him, “Francis, Francis, go and repair my house, which as you can see, is falling into ruins.” God told Francis, as God had told Jeremiah, the house is coming down, unless you act. And Francis took it literally and helped repair the church he was in, and later other churches. Then he

heard a sermon on the very passage we will read together, introducing ordination—"I am sending you out as sheep among wolves, don't take a purse, don't take an extra shirt." God was telling Francis that the church needed to pay more attention to God and less attention to its own comfort. So he became a beggar, preaching on the street, welcoming men and women to his ministry, telling his wealthy and annoyed father, "I don't want my inheritance. Here I am, with the poor, where God sent me, no matter what."

Sometimes reform comes hard. St Francis was willing to take on that difficulty. Sometimes the truth is hard to take, sometimes the good deed will be punished. When we are called to do it, it may take courage. It may take patience and sacrifice and trouble. But when we are called to do it, when we say to God, "Here I am, use me," then God is with us, to do it, to follow through with it, no matter what.

Jesus' trial, his suffering and his crucifixion mean many things to us, but one thing they mean is this. Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was for everyone and he preached and showed that message no matter what. Knowing that it would get him into trouble, knowing that the authorities wouldn't like it, knowing that he would be killed, he still told the truth and he still *was* the truth as God had placed the truth in him.

We often think of the cross as taking away the punishment for our sins. But the cross is also, maybe even more so, about giving us something. The cross gives us the power to do good, to do what God calls us to do, no matter what. Jesus was entirely human. Through his trial and suffering and death he is subject to all that we are subject to—pain, humiliation, isolation, abandonment, even hopelessness. And he accepts all that in a way that pronounces his own freedom. He is going to be what we all are meant to be, no matter what the cost. No matter that his own followers abandon him, no matter that his own religious leaders beat and torment him, no matter that the Roman authorities break him. All their power cannot make him be what he is not—so all their power is nothing, in comparison to the power of God.

As one writer recently put it, Jesus does not suffer so that we won't have to. "It is the other way around. [Jesus] accepted [suffering] because we do have to. His was a cross that had always been ours, the one way open to us, in a skewed world, for putting a stop to the consequences of our own malice without adding to them. Accepting that way, the way of the cross, was an act of solidarity with us and an offer of solidarity with him—an appeal for us to follow him by willingly taking up whatever crosses the world imposes, by making them occasions for joy, by forgiving."¹

Here's an example: I know a child who was abused when he was very young. He was neglected, terribly, he was hurt physically and emotionally. He doesn't remember much of it, but it's still with him. Now he has been adopted by a different family. But that little boy is still so angry. Of course, he's angry at his biological family, at the abuse. But the anger comes out in his adoptive family—shouting, spitting, kicking, throwing things—and it's

¹ Charles Hefling, "Why the Cross?" *Christian Century* Mar 11, 2013.

very hard for his adoptive parents to take. But they do. They contain it, they work with it, and they stay who they are, loving him as best they can. Because they know it's not the boy's fault, that his anger was given to him by a broken world, that his broken heart needs a great deal of time to heal. And they know that responding in kind to his anger is only going to continue the cycle. They take the punishment that others deserve, if there is such a thing as deserving in this picture. Not because they want to suffer, but because they want to ease the suffering of their son, they want to compensate for the terrible weaknesses of others.

To do good despite the beating we may take for it—that is an expression of freedom, of power, even of resurrection. Good can endure despite evil; as in the case of this family, good becomes visible precisely because of the evil that was done. Evil can be turned around, can be transformed into good—just as swords can be beaten into plowshares.

There is nothing redemptive about suffering in and of itself. There is nothing good about suffering until and unless the sufferer can find hope for their own personhood. Unless the abused wife, the enslaved child, the tortured prisoner, the threatened prophet, can say to their oppressors, you do not define me; God defines me. I will be who God created me to be—no matter what.

The cross says to us that somehow, despite the power that violence and oppression wield, somehow, I can choose how I react. When we are hurt, retaliation feels automatic, instinctive, and irresistible. My kids tell me this all the time, and I'm sure many of you have heard it as well—"but he hit me, but you made me feel bad! So what could I do but hit back, but what could I do but to say the nasty thing that sprang into my head!" But the gospel teaches that we can choose to do it differently. No matter what the provocation, we can choose to do good and not evil. No matter what the hurt, we can choose not to hurt back. No matter what, no matter what, no matter what.

We are called, each of us, in one way or another, to say with Jesus, "I do not want to die, I do not want to suffer or to be killed. But I will be who God created me to be, I will do what God created me to do, no matter what." We are all called to say, with Jesus, I can go down even the path that Jesus followed through suffering and death, I can go down even that path, because I know that God goes with me, because I know that that path leads to life for all people. Even when it leads through pain and death, still, it leads to life—no matter what.