

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, February 3, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-30

Sermon: And you shall speak (Epiphany 4)

“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” Luke 4:22.

At least that was how it started out...

A couple of weeks ago, I watched a film – part of my post-Christmas bingeing on Netflix. It's called “Come Sunday”, and it tells the story of Carleton Pearson, an African-American preacher who was once a protégé of Oral Roberts and elevated to be bishop of the Pentecostal church.

Pearson went through a spiritual crisis. A series of events caused him to question what he had always been taught about salvation – who it is that gets into heaven, and who is condemned to hell, which is one of the core beliefs of the fundamentalist church. He saw a news clip showing victims of genocide in Africa. Knowing that many of those victims were not saved according to his tradition, he found it impossible to reconcile his belief in a loving God, with the thought of so many condemned to eternal suffering.

He studied scripture, he prayed, he cried out, and then he swore he heard the voice of God - “They will all be with me in heaven.” On Sunday he went to church and that is what he preached: “They will all be with me in heaven.”

His church didn't throw him off a cliff, but they came pretty close. Pearson believed that God had given him a word, but it was a word that questioned their traditional theology of who is in, and who is out.

His conversion experience led to wave after wave of visits – from his best friend, his elders, his most loyal followers, his teacher. All of them begging him to back off, to recant, to say it was the devil that made him do it. But though he struggled with their rejection, he couldn't. He believed that God had called him out of his rigid categories – and that God's love was enough to save everyone, whether they took Jesus as their personal savior or not. That was the word God had put in his heart, his mouth and his head – that all will be with me in heaven.

The next Sunday he told the congregation: “I regret it. I should have done things differently.” But then he pulled out his Bible and read passage after passage where everyone regardless of nationality or creed or lifestyle is included in God's redemption. 1 John and Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians – “the Bible is full of contradictions” he tells the congregation. It holds images of God as a monster, and God who loves everyone for ever and for always. Pearson said he chooses to believe in the God of love. “I am closer to God now than I have ever been.” But his critics said “You know, you will spend eternity separated from God for these beliefs.”

Just because God puts a word in your mouth doesn't mean things are going to go smoothly. And how do you know? How do you know that what you heard might actually be God's word?

Carleton Pearson was not alone in his experience.

Jesus had a very similar experience. Jesus was the hometown boy who did good. He spoke well, he chose a positive and well-loved scripture from the beloved prophet Isaiah. If he had been a politician, and if he had stopped right there to receive their applause and call it a day, they probably would have voted for them. They were amazed at the gracious words that came from Jesus' mouth.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He was not a politician. He was not looking for their applause, and he certainly didn't want their votes. He wanted them to think hard about God's grace.

Somehow in our English translation, we turn the Greek word *charitos*, which means something gifted or loving or blessed, into our English word *gracious*, which to me sounds more like something that is polite – or nice – or respectable. Maybe what the gospel really means is Jesus' words were “grace-filled” – “full of God's grace” or “a reminder of God's love for all.”

Jesus took those words of grace, those inspiring, good-news, God-revealing words, and he interpreted what the words would really mean in that same community, a community he knew too well. It turned out those gracious words, applied to the real world, were not so nice, after all.

Perhaps Jesus knew that those who were ready to pat him on the back and tell him what a great job he was doing – that in their hearts they were already comparing him to their own scholarly sons, making fun of his working class background, and heading home to complain about foreigners stealing their jobs, or widows and orphans looking for hand-outs.

Jesus did not spare their feelings when he told them what God's grace set loose in the world might actually do. With a couple of well chosen biblical references, he reminded the crowd that God's love is for everyone, but especially for the foreigner, the poor, the outsider, the impure. With the prophets Elijah and Elisha, Jesus reminded his listeners that God moves far beyond the boundaries of respectable people when fulfilling God's kindom.

That upset people. They had these nice, tidy categories that they didn't want changed: this is what God's people look like; this is what leadership looks like; this is what salvation looks like. Don't you go quoting scripture and messing things up for us, Jesus! How did HE know that that was really God's word? Who was he to speak God's word?

Now Jeremiah goes back even further. Jeremiah lived six centuries before Jesus, and 26 hundred years before our century. But the story somehow sounds the same. Jeremiah was young when he had a vision of God placing the word in his mouth. God

didn't promise Jeremiah that the way ahead would be easy. God said: "Do not be afraid of the ones I send you to, for I send you to challenge nations and rulers and kingdoms and all the powers that be. But remember that I am with you."

Jeremiah proclaimed the word that God put in his mouth, and he felt close to God. He kicked up a lot of dust, rocked more than a few boats, testified to kings and rulers. Like all prophets, he believed that he was called by God not to shore up the old institutions of their faith, but to break new ground, and name injustice. With no certainty except the belief that this was the Word of God, Jeremiah did what he believed God wanted him to do.

But how do you know? How do you test the word you have been given, especially when you think it might be God's word for you?

We've seen all the news reports about people who committed horrible acts because they believed that God told them to do it. We have seen wars and terrorism abound because of a twisted interpretation of God's holy word. We've seen the guy on the street corner proclaiming the end of the World – because God told him so.

How do you know?

In all the stories we've heard today: Hebrew prophecy, Jesus' revelation, and contemporary Christianity; all of those who heard God's word, weighed and tested and evaluated the word they heard through a variety of means. Bible study, meditation, prayer, speaking with loved ones. In the reformed church tradition we refer to something called the Wesleyan quadrilateral as a way of testing the living word we think we might have heard.

First of all, comes the measure of scripture. Does our understanding of God's word have consistency and integrity with the words that we find in our Bible? Scripture is the witness of people who were inspired by God, and it has much to teach us. It's true: sometimes people who quote the Bible pull verses out of context to suit their point of view. One has to study the Bible in order to make sense of the word we find there.

Second, comes tradition. Tradition is more than just the custom or the culture of a faith community which we have gotten used to. Tradition means measuring our vision against the spirit that shaped the Christian community throughout history and, in times of stagnation or corruption, gave it new life again.

The third wall of the quad is reason. Being true to the word always requires us to ask some tough questions. It means examining our faith on the basis of logic and the more practical considerations, to allow ourselves to wonder: is this vision feasible, and what is the best way to fulfil it?

The fourth wall is the one that earned it the name Wesleyan. John Wesley was trained for ministry by the Church of England, he was already engaged in biblical studies, life in a traditional community of faith, and intellectual pursuits. But Wesley knew that the word of God needed to touch his heart as well. The word of God, he would tell us, is something you just have to feel.

To feel in your heart the word that offers us belonging, and justice, and that inspires our curiosity and compassion, that brings meaning to words like grace and hope. That is how you recognize God's word.

This year at Rideau Park, we have been engaged in the Affirming Ministries discernment process, which resulted in writing a Vision Statement – we “tested” a lot of words for that statement. We have also been working on a new governance structure, which has produced many, many and more words. As we write these statements, we choose our words carefully, they are inspired, then they are edited, then they are inspired and edited some more. Then they are challenged in a meeting, then they are re-worked and sometimes a light bulb goes off... Epiphany! It never comes close to being the word of God – but the words themselves do start to feel like a mission, or a way forward.

All the words we offer – whether it be in scripture or in song, in prayer or in policy – all of these are the honest, compassionate, generous offering of our experience of God in our midst, and where God might be calling us to go.

God's true Word is too big to be contained in any one language, sermon, prophecy, even in our silence. But when we offer our words of faith, with the courage to face a challenge, we can build bridges of understanding, and moments of grace and hope. May God give us this day a living word, that we may go forth in witness. Amen