

Title: Free(d) to See

Date: 8/21/2022 (Proper 16, Year C)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#); [Psalm 71:1-6](#); [Hebrews 12:18-29](#); [Luke 13:10-17](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/5zqsjBQ5tDw?t=1157>

In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge;
you are my crag and my stronghold.
I pray to go wherever you send me
and speak the words you command.

Amen.

Three years ago I preached my first sermon at St. Chrysostom's Church in Chicago. This morning's readings are the same readings that were assigned that Sunday. Standing in the pulpit in front of all those new faces, I identified SO MUCH with Jeremiah.

So, I began that sermon with this confession.

“Ah Lord God!

Truly I do not know how to speak,
for I just graduated from seminary in May
and started working here last week” (Jer 1:6ish)

Three years later, it feels like I only know *a little bit* more than what I knew then. To be clear, I say “a little bit” relative to how much there is still to learn and know and do. There are still so many books to read,

so many podcasts to listen to,
so much research to be done,
and so many more conversations to have.

I would be a frequent victim of **analysis paralysis**, glued to my chair behind my desk, except that so much of being a priest is about showing up. It's about showing up

AND trusting

that there is a reason that God put me in this place,

with these people,
in this moment.

I may not have the *perfect* words for this sermon or for comforting someone whose loved one just died. I may not have the *perfect* follow up question for a newcomer or a long-time member. But it's not about perfection, if such a thing even exists in ministry.

It's not about **me** finding the words, either.

It's about letting go of my fears and worries and anxieties

enough for God to get through.

It's about relaxing my clenched jaw
so that God could put God's words in my mouth.
It's about releasing the tension in my body
so that the Holy Spirit
can move in me and through me,
leading me to where I'm called to be.
It's about *seeing* all the ways we are
and *imagining* all the ways we CAN
come together as a parish here and out in the world
as the body of Christ.

Jeremiah saw himself as a boy.
God helped him see himself
as someone God has already consecrated
to the holy work of prophecy.

To be consecrated means "to be set apart for a sacred purpose."¹ Just as Sabbath is a period of time set apart for the sacred purpose of dedicating it to God, Jeremiah was a person set aside for the sacred purpose of prophecy, speaking the words of God.

This is serious business, and it probably doesn't make you a very popular person either. Prophecy, in the Old Testament, isn't about predicting the future. It's about revealing truths about the present world,
naming realities that some refuse to see,
or cannot see.

And there are reasons that some people refuse to
or cannot
see those truths.

A priest shared with me this saying, "Culture kills change."²
If culture doesn't change,
every time we pull down something,
someone else will put it back up.
Every time we destroy something, someone else will rebuild it.
Every time we plant something, someone else will pull it up.

This applies to culture, **and** the structures that teaches and upholds cultural norms and traditions. Examples of structures that maintain our cultural status quo are family, school, church.

Over time, these structures become more solid and more geared toward maintaining themselves and keeping things as they are. Things tend to stay the same, even when they're not great. This is why God charged the prophets with the responsibility to "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). They help us see things as they are, and as they could be.

To dream that things could be different than they are requires **hope**.³ A hope grounded not in fantasy

but in the God who has and will deliver us.

To make that dream a reality requires **humility**,

to challenge and be challenged,

to transform and be transformed.

This takes a lot of time and a lot of energy,

both to bring about the change AND to deal with the backlash.

No wonder Jeremiah was like, “Um God, are you sure you mean me?” His uncertainty likely centered both on whether he had the skills for the job AND whether he even wanted that job in the first place.

No matter what we think we can and can't do,

no matter what others say we can and can't do,

God sees the image of God in *us*.

It might take time

for us to mature into the fullness of that image.

It might take practice

to see ourselves and one another the way God see us.

But let us remember that God sees the image of God in us **so much**

that God took human form

to remind us of this truth

and nudge us toward what we are called to do.

So, what are we called to do? How do we know when to pull down, and when to build? As in so many things, let us look to the Gospel.

It is Sabbath, and Jesus is teaching in one of the synagogues. Just then, there appeared a woman who was bent over. A spirit had locked her in this position for eighteen years. In addition to affecting her physically, this also affected her socially and psychologically.

Back in those days, someone in her condition would have been considered unclean, a person to be avoided and NOT to be touched. She had enough social support to stay alive, but not a parent who would travel to ask for her healing, as the Centurion did for his servant (Lk 7:1-10), or friends who would attract his attention on her behalf, like the four friends who broke through a roof to lift a paralyzed man down to Jesus (Lk 5:17-26).

We don't know how old she was when the spirit afflicted her. But after eighteen years she could no longer imagine life being any different. Even though she likely heard about Jesus' reputation for healing, she didn't even think to ask.

Jesus took one look at her

and saw how tightly she was bound by Satan.

Imagine heavy metal chains on her back,

keeping her from standing up straight.

Imagine a barbed wire fence around her,
separating her from other people.
Jesus pulled down those chains and that fence with the words,
“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”

But those words alone couldn't break through. After being trapped in that life for eighteen years, she couldn't see how life could be any different.

To tear down that last barrier, to show her the truth behind his words, Jesus touched her with his hands.

“When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God” (Lk 13:13).

Jesus pulled down and destroyed so that she could be free.

Immediately, there was a backlash.

The leader of the synagogue complained loudly to the crowd. "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." He made this about the woman, and about the Sabbath. It's as if he was saying, "This isn't a life-or-death situation. It's been eighteen years, why couldn't she just wait another day? Why can't she be patient?"

I wonder how *he* would feel if he had been in her shoes for those eighteen years, if that physical, emotional and psychological weight had been on his shoulders for all that time. **But he couldn't see things the way Jesus saw them.** His tradition had drawn such clear lines for him that he forgot who drew those lines and why they were drawn in the first place.

Yes, God commanded us to keep the Sabbath. AND God brought God's people out of the land of Egypt so that they would no longer be in bondage, no longer be slaves to the Egyptians and no longer slaves to work (Deut 5:12-15).⁴ The version of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy makes it clear that observing Sabbath is all about honoring that freedom and living into that freedom. Sabbath **should** point us to the importance of freedom not just for us, but for all the people and all the creatures that engage in any kind of labor.

Jesus pulled down and destroyed so that we could be free,
free from the weight of sin and shame,
free from society's single-minded focus on work and productivity,
free from cultural expectations and traditions,
free from standards of perfection,
free to commit ourselves to holy work of questioning our assumptions about how things ought to be and
setting others free.

When we forget the meaning behind Sabbath,
or any religious tradition or belief or practice handed down to us,

we think religion is all about drawing lines and staying inside those lines.

We forget that God meant for us to be free, that Jesus came to set us free.

So, on this day set apart for God, let us find ways to realign ourselves with God's purpose for us and for the world, let us reconnect with God and the body of Christ.

May we be free to see ourselves as God sees us.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/consecration/>

² Thank you, [the Rev. Cn. Steven Lee!](#)

³ See: Sandman S1 Ep4: A Hope in Hell

⁴ Raynal, C. E. (2010). [Pastoral Perspective on Luke 13:10–17](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 3, p. 384). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.