

Pr. Franklin Wilson
Luther Memorial Church
Jeremiah 1:4–10; Psalm 71:1–6
1 Corinthians 13.1-13; St. Luke 4.21-30

“See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

“They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'³He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'... When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way”

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany Sunday, Jan. 31

Both Jeremiah and St Luke evoke the prophetic struggle—a struggle made especially difficult by familiarity, that most common of vexations. Jeremiah wants no part in God’s decision to make him a prophet; it was decided before he was born, and he had no choice in the matter. Thus, when told of God’s decision, Jeremiah flatly refuses. No matter. The God who chooses the Jews and raises the dead, contradicts Jeremiah just as Jesus contradicts death. If God says Jeremiah’s a prophet, then a prophet he is, or will be when the time comes. After all, God has put the Word into his mouth and touched his lips. There’s no taking it back. What’s done is done, and Jeremiah will simply have to make the best (or worst) of it: “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” Jeremiah can see what’s coming: loneliness, pain, misery, rejection, and lots of it. Speaking for God is a lonely—even a dangerous—business, and Jeremiah wants none of it.

I sometimes forget that I work (and we worship!) just two blocks from a fine University Museum of Art: I mean the Chazen. But, every now and then, my wife and I remember venture over and, once again, are rewarded for taking the time. Each visit, I insist on seeing the impressive “Adoration of the Shepherds” that adorns the west 2nd floor gallery. Francesco Solimena’s immense work from 1688 continually re-captures my

imagination. It's not only the Nativity in general that I love, but it's the wooden beam protruding from the end of the manger to form a cross, and the dead lamb lying in the foreground at the foot of the beam, and the three roosters tied together and tossed across the pathetic lamb, all suggesting the impending Passion of our Lord—here pictured as an infant child, but soon enough to share the same grim fate as the silent lamb and the fowl—the fate against which Jeremiah and all the prophets struggle.

It's a stunning image—all the more so in relation to today's Gospel because it's not at all clear in Solimena's picture exactly which person, if any, is Joseph. He might be the male figure to the left, in the background, behind Mary. That character is portrayed as elderly with silver hair and beard, dressed in a yellow robe. He seems improbably old, yet it's hard to see who else might represent Joseph—the Child's putative father.

Moreover, the translation of the line from today's Gospel inquiring or declaring or questioning Jesus' paternal parentage is suggestively ambiguous. It could read (as does our translation), "Is not this Joseph's son?" Or, "This can't be Joseph's son!" Or, "This isn't the son of Joseph." Or, in the parlance of our times, "This ain't Joseph's boy!" In other words, the text may hint a mocking memory of Jesus' questionable parentage.

Was Joseph *really* his father? And if so, when did he move from carpenter to rabbi? How did a familiar carpenter's son become an mysterious teacher whose gracious words astonished all his hometown hearers. Luke's word, *astonished*, is a technical term used by the rabbis to indicate *pre-faith*, a radical amazement that may lead to faith, but might also lead to something else. It's radical amazement that, when betrayed or alienated, suddenly turns to radical rage—crimes of passion, 2nd degree murder.

My late maternal grandfather, born in the last year of the 19th century, in a tiny village on the west bank of Oregon's Willamette River, went through childhood known as "The Bastard." I did not learn this until some months following his death at age 98. But, when I inquired after the identity of grandpa's father—a thing about which he refused to speak throughout his long life—his second cousin readily told me. So painful had been Grandpa's childhood moniker that he never discussed even the slightest detail of his life as the village bastard. As a teen-ager and young man, he was a star athlete

and a bright student—but behind the images in the faded photo albums you can almost hear the taunts and whispers, “He ain’t Ryan’s son—he’s a bastard.”

Re-reading this passage, we might wonder if Jesus didn’t suffer the same indignity, the same painful taunts and jeers: “He thinks he’s better than we are, but he ain’t. He ain’t Joseph’s boy! He ain’t even a carpenter’s kid. He’s a bastard!”

That might explain the manner in which Jesus goes after his hometown hearers: taunting them with memories of his grand miracles performed in Capernaum, his adopted town; reminding them that in the days of Elijah, it wasn’t hometown folks God helped, but foreigners—a poor widow from Sidon (that most despised of places), and a leprous Syrian general. Not merely a Syrian (which would have been bad enough), *but an army man* to boot. Those memories got them mad. So mad, Luke says, they were “enraged.” Mad enough to throw him off a cliff and kill him.

Of course, as Jeremiah and Jesus knew, killing prophets was no surprise. How many prophets had met their end by stoning? But here the crowd’s rage so overcomes them, their anger so over boils, that they make a mess of murder—they can’t even kill him correctly: they try *to throw him* instead of throwing rocks at him. Miracle of miracles, in their blind fury he does what they had wanted, yet they’re too enraged to see it: *he does a wonder* all dead prophets would have loved to do: like Houdini, he escapes.

“They led him up to the brow of the cliff on which their town was built, intending to throw him over.” “But he passed through the midst of them, and went on his way.” It’s a miracle even bigger than those he did in Capernaum. They intended to kill him—just like their ancestors intended to kill Jeremiah. Yet Jesus gives them the slip and (as Luke says) goes *on his way*, that he might die in his own way, in his own time, in Jerusalem, on a cross, with Romans driving home the nails and spear. *The cross is his way*—an excruciating death of public humiliation. It’s the way of all who speak for God and follow a crucified messiah. *But fear not*: the way of the cross is also the way to eternal life through death. And that beats everything he did in Capernaum, and Nazareth, and everywhere else. His way of the cross is the really big one—and there’s no rage large enough to

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stop it. As David Jenkins, the Bishop of Durham, used to say, “Not even the church can keep a good God down.” Thanks be to God.