

Disruption

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 22, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”*

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

*But the Lord said to me,
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
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 to deliver you, says the Lord.”*

*Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
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 1:4-10, NRSV)*

The great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once related a deeply significant conversation he had. While visiting the University of Notre Dame, where he had been a teacher for a few years, he met an older experienced professor who had spent most of his life there. And while they strolled over the beautiful campus, the old professor said with a certain melancholy in his voice, ‘You know ... my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions *were* my work.’”

Nouwen was transformed by the professor’s statement. He later wrote, “It has been the interruptions to my everyday life that have most revealed to me the divine mystery of which I am a part ... All of these interruptions presented themselves as opportunities ... invited me to look in a new way at my identity before God. Each interruption took something away from me; each interruption offered something new.”

How many days of our lives feel like one interruption after another? They can be packed with surprises: an unexpected knock at the door, a phone call from a telemarketer, a baby who wakes up an hour early with a dirty diaper.

I am not one who generally appreciates interruptions. I'm a goal-setter and a planner, and once I get on-task, I don't like to be stopped. I'm also a creature of routine, and can even feel a little disoriented when those routines get broken up by unforeseen circumstances.

And yet, when I'm honest, some of the best, most important moments of my life have been the result of interruptions – unannounced company, unforeseen changes, unscheduled conversations, sudden calls for help, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, roads less traveled, changes of plans.

But it's one thing to experience an interruption, and another to experience *disruption*. If an interruption is a brief distraction, a *disruption* is a radical break, an intrusion, that alters and unsettles and perhaps even *blows up* the course of things. With a *disruption*, the field of play is changed forever, and the rules change with it, and things may never be the same again.

For the last year and a half, we – both as a church and as a larger society – have experienced the greatest disruption in more than a generation. And it's still not over – not yet, anyway. Speaking very personally, this disruption has been a greater challenge than I could ever have imagined. I know that you know what I mean. We have been forced to do things very differently and have struggled to figure out what is best, without clear signs always of what the best thing *is*. And at a still deeper level, we have often struggled to find God in the midst of it all and to hear and move with the Spirit.

And yet, we know somehow that it is in the midst of those great disruptions that God always seems to come calling. The Bible is full of such stories:

- Abraham and Sarah ... who are called to leave their homes and families and all that was safe and familiar behind and set off in faith to a land that God would reveal.
- Moses ... who is called to say goodbye to his comfortable, uneventful life as a shepherd and to go down to Egypt and face off against the most powerful man in the world.
- Young Mary of Nazareth ... the unwed teenage girl called of God to be the mother of the Messiah.
- Or, as we will see today, young Jeremiah ... called to be a prophet with an unwelcome message in a dangerous time.

They were all ordinary people. But when *God* called – when those disruptions became the occasion for a *divine* disruption – there was no going back. They could never be the same again.

In today's reading we witness the call of the prophet Jeremiah – sometimes called the “weeping prophet” for the tears that he would shed for his people. He was the son of a priest and lived in the Kingdom of Judah in the last quarter of the 7th century and early 6th century BC in the final years of its relative independence, caught as it was between the far greater military powers of Egypt to the southwest and the Babylonian empire to the northeast.

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began in a time of relative hope, a year after the righteous King Josiah had turned the nation toward repentance and away from widespread idolatry. But the good intentions of the king would not be enough – past sins were too grave and the people too easily reverted to their old ways – and Jeremiah began to denounce their idolatry and announce the impending destruction of the kingdom. We'll just say his message didn't go over well.

Following the sudden battlefield death of King Josiah in 609 BC, the kingdom began playing a game of vacillating, shifting alliances in order to preserve the status quo. And perhaps for a while (at least in the eyes of the royal and temple elites, anyway), this seemed to work. But Jeremiah kept up his denunciations, even in the face of bitter persecution. Those in power had not met the demands of the covenant made with God at Sinai, and instead ran after other gods, practiced injustice against the poor and needy, and placed their trust in the presence of the temple as a divine charm against destruction. This charm, of course, would not be enough, as Jerusalem *did* fall, its temple destroyed – just as Jeremiah had been saying – in 587 BC and its leaders and leading citizens deported to Babylon.

Looking back, that time immediately following King Josiah's reforms must have been a time of great hope for the faithful. It must have seemed that all would turn out right. And so, to young Jeremiah on that day, the unwelcome call from God must have seemed an impossible task, an unbearable burden, an intolerable *disruption* to a personal life which seemed secure, and to a *national* life which seemed to have turned around. It must have seemed like an invitation to pain and uncertainty.

As with others who have experienced this kind of divine disruption, Jeremiah raised his protest. "I am only a boy!" he exclaimed. *I'm not ready for this ... I can't do this ... What about those who won't listen? ... What about my safety? ... Why can't you send someone else?*

God is unimpressed:

*Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
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 to deliver you, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 1:7-8, NRSV)*

Perhaps you have never heard the voice of God speak to you in quite so direct and unmistakable a way. But I *know* that you know those disruptions which invade your settled life and overturn everything. They force us to re-assess everything, to look at our lives in a completely different way ... the death of a loved one ... an unexpected diagnosis ... the loss of a career ... a painful divorce.

Or the anxiety and frustration and soul-weariness we have *all* known for the last year and a half.

And as in all such times, we *have* struggled to figure out what is best, and it's been hard. And we have often struggled to discern where *God* is in all of it. But if our Presbyterian faith teaches us anything, it teaches us that no such season of our lives is wasted. In the midst of these disruptions, God does indeed come calling:

It is God's voice which emerges from the silence of despair ...

God's light which comes to shine in the darkness ...

God's new life which arises from the ashes of the old.

We know what it is to be led along an unmarked path. All of us here today are on a journey – a journey of a life lived in the light of faith – that has claimed us, and yet, in so many ways, it isn't the journey we ever expected. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has written, we are “Children of the Disruption”, for the faith in which we stand is a faith forged in the fires of disruption! The pioneers who have gone before us hardly lived the lives they would have predicted, or perhaps would even have *chosen*, and yet, in those places, stripped of the safe and familiar, they discovered themselves in the presence of the Holy One.

Young Jeremiah might have expected a quiet life as a priest, a life dedicated to the service of God through the Temple. And the Temple was believed to be God's own presence in the midst of the city, and so long as God was there, the nation could never fall. And so, this word of *plucking up* and *pulling down*, of *destroying* and *overthrowing* surely came as a devastating shock. The long-repeated mantra of “peace and safety” would be shown to be a lie ... the assurance of everything going on as it always had, a delusion. And he somehow knew that these words – which would earn him many enemies and no friends – would, in their fulfillment, break his heart.

What he could *not* know at the time is that these very things were breaking *God's* heart too. The divine justice could not allow things to continue on as they had. But revealed in the poetry and experience of the weeping prophet is that *wounded divine love* which could not let go of a people, in spite of it all ... revealing a *suffering* deeper and more encompassing than he could fathom ... a *steadfastness* stretching across all time ... a *restlessness* which, in the words of Karl Barth, “will neither stop nor stay until all that is dead has been brought to life and a new world has come into being”.

It is this God – the *living* God – who is revealed in the day of disruption.

We have all lived long enough to know that the comfort of the divine presence is not one that assures that all will go smoothly or that we will experience no conflict, pain, or disillusionment. Life in this world – and life before God – bears with it all the troubles of our mortal existence. There is no escape, no pass exempting us from these things. And so, what *is* the comfort? What is the assurance? For Jeremiah? For we who are called today?

It's this, right at the beginning of the passage, in plain sight –

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you ... (Jeremiah 1:5, NRSV)*

A simple but powerful witness to a Love greater than the farthest reaches of our imaginations which knew us before we were born ... a Love always on the move, bringing new life to our dead places ... a Love which never leaves us, faithfully staying with us to the end, and beyond.

Disruptions happen, but in them, holiness can happen too. We are indeed "Children of the Disruption," but that's just another way of saying that we are the children of God.

To the glory of God! Amen.