

*Through a Mirror, Dimly*

*Jeremiah 1:4-10; I Corinthians 13:8-13*

*Whitefish UMC*

*January 31, 2010*

- † If you are a movie buff, as I am, you know that we're in the midst of the award season for 2009's best films. The Golden Globes and the Screen Actors Guild prizes have already been awarded, and it's just a short time until the nominees for the Oscars will be announced.
- † When it comes to the Best Actor nod, all the buzz revolves around veteran Jeff Bridges. He stars as Bad Blake, a country western music star who's fallen far over the hill in a movie called *Crazy Heart*. Bad Blake is a has-been at 57—down and out, driving a 1978 beater car, and playing in bowling alley bars.
- † “I used to be somebody,” he sings (reminiscent of Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*, who said, famously, “I coulda been a contender!). But then Bad Blake adds, poignantly, “But now I'm somebody else.” Between songs, he stumbles out the back stage door to get sick in a bucket. The only question is whether he will die of liver failure or lung cancer. When asked where his past hit songs came from, he responds, “life, unfortunately.”
- † How interesting that last year's Oscar winner was Mickey Rourke, a beaten-down and overlooked actor who played a similar character in *The Wrestler*. Rourke played Randy “The Ram Jam” Robinson, a professional wrestler twenty years past his prime. He can't pay the rent for his sleazy trailer and sleeps in a rusted van. His mind and his body are a wreck.

- † Bad choices and bad luck have landed Blake and the Ram in bad places. They are growing old alone, estranged from their families, broke, and in bad health. But they keep on keeping on, and so we feel empathy for them. When their respective films end, we wonder about the fate of Blake and Ram, and we hope they will be okay.
- † We may not be in as bad shape as Blake and Ram, but there is a part of their story that is our story. We don't like to admit it, but there are some things in our lives that cannot be fixed, that are broken down. Whether it's our health, our relationships, our future, our past, we who seek to follow Jesus face the question of how God is at work in these failed aspects of our lives.
- † For the hard truth is, not everything turns out well. To quote the Rolling Stones, "You can't always get what you want." Is there comfort in knowing that even for Jesus, not everything turns out well either?
- † Take today's Gospel lesson from Luke. Dick didn't read it, because I wanted us to focus primarily on the readings from Jeremiah and First Corinthians. But if you were here last week, you remember that Jesus has just been given the scrolls to read in the synagogue. He opens the book of Isaiah and proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release for the captives and the oppressed."
- † Then he says something shocking to his hometown listeners: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" At first they are proud of him, applauding his fine words, claiming him as their hometown hero. But then he starts to preach to them about how they will not be wise enough to accept his message, saying instead that it's the outsiders who will understand and receive the first fruits of the kingdom.

- † All of a sudden, their approval turns to rage, and they threaten him and drive him to the edge of a cliff where they want to hurl him to the rocks below. Realizing their intent, Jesus avoids them and goes on his way.
- † What started as a grand entrance into ministry quickly turns into potential disaster. (Sounds a little like today’s political scene for our President, doesn’t it?) And while our lives don’t mirror such a lofty scenario, we can relate.
- † So can the writer of the psalm we read responsively today. He praises God as his rock and his fortress. He praises God for his mighty acts and marvelous deeds. But do you hear the note of fear that creeps in in the second stanza? He’s worried that as he grows old and feeble, people will look at him and say, “God has abandoned him!”
- † And it’s not just other people’s observations that he’s worried about. He can’t help but wonder if God will really stick with him and carry him through. We’ve had those same fears—at least I have. And yet, almost as a mantra, the psalmist continues to praise God, to repeat, even though his words are not without doubt, his trust in God’s presence through it all.
- † Daniel Clendenin, writing in his lectionary blog “Journey With Jesus,” provides this wonderful reflection on the life of the prophet Jeremiah, whose story is a part of this Sunday’s lectionary readings:
- † “Jeremiah's story begins with a divine call to forty years of faithful if reluctant ministry, but also forty years of deeply personal struggle for the man the church honors as the "weeping prophet." Jeremiah's troubles remind us that there is no call without conflict, and no divine summons without human struggle. In the words of the young and earnest priest in Georges Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*, "We pay a heavy, very heavy price for the super-human dignity of our calling. The ridiculous is always so near to

the sublime. And the world, usually so indulgent to foibles, hates ours instinctively."

† Jeremiah protested his personal inadequacies. He struggled for forty years with a sense of failure, with virulent opposition from detractors, and with deep discouragement. He was beaten (20:2), received death threats (26:8), imprisoned (37:15), thrown down a well (38:6), and derided as an unpatriotic crank and traitor. The prophets, priests and kings dismissed him as seditious. God's call on his life made his heart break and his bones tremble (23:9).

† God gave Jeremiah something more precious than a stoic exhortation to perseverance. He promised his divine presence. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. So do not be afraid, for I am with you" (1:4–10). This is the same comfort that the psalmist claimed: "From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb" (71:6). It's as if the resilience of even the most fragile life despite our brokenness is itself a miracle.

† Believing this divine promise requires the audacity and courage to believe that God's presence gives perspective to all our problems. Conflict and brokenness are not inimical, (foreign,) to God's call; sometimes they are part and parcel of it. The gospel for this week makes this point (Luke 4:21–30)."

† Wow. I don't know about you, but I would rather not accept so willingly and cavalierly that conflict and brokenness are sometimes part and parcel of God's call. But when I stop to think about it, I know from my life, from many of your lives, that it is true. Now if your life has turned out just the

way you expected and hoped it would, then I am thankful for that, and I rejoice with you.

- † But if you wish that your life had unfolded a bit differently, then join the club. If you wonder where God is in the failures and disappointments you've experienced, you're not alone. Even Jesus wondered where God was leading him and how it would turn out. From the cross, he quoted a Psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- † Again, I quote Daniel Clendenin: "In his little book *In the Name of Jesus* about the three temptations of Jesus to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, Henri Nouwen concludes with the words of Jesus to Peter in John 21:18: "When you were young you put on your belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go." This is Christian maturity, says Nouwen, the ability and willingness to relinquish power and control, and instead to be led where we'd rather not go — 'to the unknown, the undesirable, and painful places.'"
- † But here's where I depart a bit from Clendenin and Nouwen, or perhaps it's just to clarify. I don't believe that God causes the brokenness and painful parts of our lives just to test us and see if we will remain faithful. But what I do believe is that the places where God calls us sometimes result in rejection and loneliness because the culture or the popular wisdom runs counter to God's kingdom values.
- † And sometimes we make stupid choices that result in poor health, broken relationships, or job failures. Sometimes we can't see how we keep repeating these mistakes and end up deeper in bad habits. And sometimes bad things just happen.

- † So we are faced with choices: do we reject God's call and deny God's leading presence in the painful parts of our lives? Or do we defy all logic and just eliminate the doubts and questions from our minds and hearts?
- † I love what Madeleine L'Engle said when asked: "Do you believe in God without any doubts?" She replied, "I believe in God with all my doubts." She, who watched her husband die a slow and painful death, lost her son to an early death, questioned God but rejected the idea of eternal or long-lasting divine punishment.
- † She said, "I cannot believe that God wants punishment to go on interminably any more than does a loving parent. The entire purpose of loving punishment is to teach, and it lasts only as long as is needed for the lesson. And the lesson is always love."
- † Which brings us to the famous passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, so often read at weddings. But not this part, the one that Dick read today. It's more often read at funerals, as it was at my sister's service, acknowledging the leaving of an adopted nine-year old daughter to be an orphan.
- † "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face-to-face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."
- † However our lives have turned out, can we not be people of faith, hope, and love? First for God, then our neighbors—all of them, even the ones we don't particularly like or approve of—and finally for ourselves. Our lives depend upon it.

† And so we come, with our doubts, our fears, our disappointments—to praise God, to love one another, and to hold fast to hope—because we seek to follow Jesus and put our trust in his grace.

† May it be so. Amen.

Sources:

Bruce Epperly, “Living by the Word,” *Christian Century*, January 26, 2010

Daniel Clendenin, “Not Everything Turns Out Well,” <http://journeywithjesus.net>

This sermon sprung from Daniel Clendenin’s blog, and I am grateful for that inspiration.