

Speaking Truth

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me and went after worthless things and became worthless themselves?

They did not say, "Where is the Lord, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.

The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit.

Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord, and I accuse your children's children. Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look; send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?

But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked; be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Speaking Truth

If you want to remember something, there are all kinds of tips and tricks you can use—word association, writing it down, reading it right before you go to sleep—but one of the most effective ways is simply to say it out loud.

I was reminded of this last week at a Presbytery committee meeting when the person sitting next to me turned and asked if I would help her remember that she needed to take her phone

with her when we moved rooms. “Mostly,” she said, “I’m telling you because I’ll remember if I say it out loud.” An hour later, when we got up to move rooms, she held up her phone—proof that her trick had worked.

Cognitive psychologists call this technique “the production effect.” It works because it engages multiple senses and helps to create multiple memory pathways. When we speak aloud, we both hear the words with our ears as well as use muscles to produce the sounds. If we’re reading aloud, we add in the visual memory. Each act helps to etch the memory into our brains. It’s why we teach the ABCs with a song, why people will repeat someone’s name back to them when they’re introduced, and why, in our family, I make our children repeat back to me the lists of tasks they’ve just been given. Saying words out loud creates stronger, richer memory traces that help the words stick in our minds in a way silent reading cannot. Speaking aloud shapes our memories.

Think about how we mark life’s most important moments—we say wedding vows out loud, not just in our hearts; we stand at a baptismal font and make promises out loud as a congregation; we speak aloud our memories when we give an eulogy or memorialize someone at their funeral; we sing hymns each week regardless of whether or not we can carry the tune, because the words matter, and the act of saying them out loud shapes us.

Families do this as well. We tell stories around the Thanksgiving table. We remember that recipe we tried that was so bad dad let all the food just fall out of his mouth rather than swallow. We remember the time when our aunt busted out an accordion to sing Christmas carols, or how grandma always gave the grandkids gifts in \$1 bills so it would seem like more than it was. When we stop telling those stories, they begin to slip away. Generations grow up no longer knowing why grandma’s pie recipe matters, or why that odd-looking Christmas ornament gets a place of honor on the tree.

This isn’t truth new. Long before psychologists studied it or named it, it existed in scripture. In the book of Deuteronomy, we hear the *Shema*, the central affirmation of Judaism: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone*. This central faith statement is accompanied with the instructions: ‘Recite these words... when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.’ And out of these instructions evolved the Jewish practice of reciting scripture out loud (often when walking), chanting it in prayer, and reading while rocking one’s body—a recognition that when we allow words to engage our whole selves, they not only root themselves in our memory, they begin to shape the very essence of who we are. Words take root in us when we give them breath. Which begins to explain our reading from Jeremiah.

The book of Jeremiah was written during a period of incredible political upheaval as the Assyrian Empire collapsed and the Babylonian empire stepped in to fill the void, ultimately leading to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. But we also know that the book of Jeremiah, as it exists today, was heavily edited, and that much of that editing occurred after the fall of Jerusalem when the people were living in exile. So the book of Jeremiah both reflects what is happening as the Babylonians come into power and responds to the later reality of desolation and exile.

Preaching to a people on the brink of political and national annihilation and later to a community evicted from their homes and dispersed into exile, one of the primary questions Jeremiah had to face was *why*—*why* has this happened? And the answers available to him weren't great. Either God had allowed this to happen, which called into question God's character (why would God allow such a terrible thing to happen?), or God was unable to stop it from happening, which called into question God's sovereignty and power. Faced with this theological quagmire, Jeremiah is called to preach.

As you might expect, Jeremiah does not preach that God was powerless to stop the Babylonians; such a theological proclamation would have been tantamount to saying that the Babylonian gods were greater than Yahweh. Instead, like so many other prophets, Jeremiah proclaims that God allowed the Babylonians to prevail in part because the people have failed to speak.

It's not exactly the reason we might expect. Surely a failure to speak isn't all that bad. But God's first indictment of the people in Jeremiah is that "they did not say." "They did not say where is the Lord, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, a land of deserts and pits, a land of drought and deep darkness, a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things," God declares, "but when you entered, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.

"[Even] the priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' ... [instead] they prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit."

The people have failed to speak. They have failed to tell their story. They have forgotten to proclaim that it was God who brought them up out of slavery and into the promised land. And, as a result, they have forgotten who they are and who God has called them to be in the world.

It matters what we say. The words we give voice to, the stories we tell, they shape our memory and our identity. God brought the people up out of slavery in Egypt, settled them in the

promised land, but the people forgot. They stopped telling the stories; they stopped saying, out loud, that it was God who did these things for them and so they turned to other gods. They forgot that it was God, not them, who got them this far, and so instead of gratitude, they looked around and thought, ‘We did fine following Yahweh... but what if we tried these other gods? Maybe life could be even better.’ The Israelites stopped telling their stories, and they started forgetting them.

We see this happening in our time too. It’s one of the reasons why the current push to whitewash parts of our national history should have us concerned. When we decide certain chapters are too painful or too uncomfortable to speak aloud, we don’t erase the past—we erase our memory of it. And once memory goes, so does the wisdom it carries. Just as Jeremiah warned that forgetting God’s deliverance would lead the people to repeat old mistakes, so too, if we refuse to name the hard truths of our history we risk repeating them. Silence doesn’t heal; it erases. And when we stop telling the truth about where we’ve been, we lose the ability to know who we are or where God is calling us to go.

Jeremiah knew that if the people stopped speaking the story of God’s deliverance, they would forget who they were. And they did, with disastrous consequences. In our own day, it can be tempting to do the same with our own national story. It’s tempting to leave out the chapters that make us uncomfortable, to cover over the cracks. But if we stop speaking the truth—if we rewrite or sanitize the story—we risk losing our very identity.

Even Jesus relied on spoken words. When tempted in the wilderness, Jesus didn’t argue silently in his heart—he spoke scripture out loud: “It is written that man shall not live by bread alone.” When he healed, he spoke words of healing. When he raised Lazarus, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And when he taught, he told stories—not simply so they could be remembered, but so they could shape the people who carried them.

Jeremiah reminds us that forgetting has consequences. But in so doing, he also reminds us that remembering, speaking, and embodying truth brings life. In a world full of distractions and competing desires, we can choose to speak aloud the words of God’s faithfulness. We can choose to tell the story of our past, both personal and communal, in ways that keep it alive in our hearts. We can choose, as a people of faith, to keep our story and God’s story intertwined in voice and memory.

It’s one of the reasons we worship every week, so that together we can give voice to our beliefs, so we can remind ourselves of who we are and whose we are. We offer up words of confession to remind ourselves that we are not perfect, and that God has called us to live in a particular way. We read together the stories of scripture to remind ourselves of who God is, how God acts in the world, and who God calls us to be. We offer up prayers of thanksgiving and lament to express our gratitude and to remind ourselves that God carries our pain with us.

But we can do this in our personal lives as well. Maybe it looks like saying grace at dinner, not because God won't bless our food if we don't, but because speaking gratitude shapes us into grateful people. Maybe it's standing up during Stewardship season to give a faith talk, sharing the ways in which you have seen God at work in your life. Perhaps it is speaking aloud a scripture verse every morning so that the word of God can echo not only in your mind but in your very being as you go through your day.

We can't afford to keep silent—not in worship, not in our homes, not in the public square. We need to keep speaking aloud the stories of God's faithfulness, the times when we've seen God do incredible things as well as the times when we, individually and collectively, have failed to live as God calls us. We must keep speaking the truth out loud. Not so that we can convince anyone else, but so that we do not forget.

So may we be bold enough to remember,
faithful enough to speak,
and humble enough to know the story is not our own, but God's.

May we carry with us courage to tell the truth,
even when silence feels safer,
and faith that every word of gratitude and faith we speak
roots us more deeply in God's love.

And may we trust in a God who still speaks—
a God whose Word became flesh,
whose Spirit gives us voice,
and whose faithfulness echoes throughout every generation.
Amen.