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“The Lord Throws”

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21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Jeremiah 1:4–10; Ps. 71:1–6; Luke 13:10–17

In Hebrew, the name, Jeremiah, means “the Lord throws.”

“In the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah” – the last *good* king of Judah, 626 BCE,
“down to the fifth month of the eleventh year” – that would be July or August, about now,
of the year 586 BCE – the year that Jerusalem is about to be sacked,
and Judah's people, good and bad, led into exile in Babylon,
the Lord throws Jeremiah into a role he hadn't seen coming.

Or perhaps he had, but had failed to acknowledge it.

King Josiah of Judah happened to have been a boy king himself
who was catapulted to kingship at the ripe old age of eight
as a result of his father, Amon's assassination.

So now in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, (he would be a whopping 21 years old)
Jeremiah, also a child, hears the word of the Lord addressing him.

Apparently, the decision about Jeremiah being a prophet was made by God
before Jeremiah was even born, and there is little Jeremiah can do to thwart it,
just as young Josiah had little to say about his vocation as king.

The Lord throws the boy Jeremiah into the role of prophet, the mouthpiece of God,
during this time of extreme upheaval and crisis in Judah's history,
just as the Lord had thrown the boy Josiah into the role of king during just such a time.

Neither have a say-so in the matter, their mild protest of little consequence;
the die of the Sovereign Lord is cast.

And I'm sure there are a thousand other things that Josiah and Jeremiah
would rather have been doing with their young lives
than to be thrown into this particular scenario:

Lord, I am only a child; I would rather be casting a line into the sea just about now.

I am only a child; I would rather be tussling with my brother
and throwing him down in a wrestling hold.

I am only a child; I would rather be tossing a ball to my dad.

I am only a child; I would rather be skipping stones on a smooth pond.

I am only a child; I would rather be throwing my head back in laughter
over a corny joke.

The word of the Lord is disruptive. It can throw us a change-up pitch,
and there is little that we can do to deflect its consequences.

The boy/child, Jeremiah, and the boy/child Josiah, at least, are open to its invitation,
which is a great thing about children like Jeremiah, like Josiah, like Samuel,
like David, like Mary, like Jesus:

they tend to go with God's throw, even when it proves disruptive of their young lives.

I have been thrown into a sense of wonder this month by the death of civil rights activist
Julius Chambers, a former graduate and Chancellor of North Carolina Central University.

I have been fascinated about accounts of his life and how, as the youngest son
of a car garage/storekeeper in Mount Gilead, NC, at age 13, young Julius
was thrown into a vocation by the Lord, too.

You see, his dream of following his two older siblings to school at the private
Laurinburg Institute was dashed when one of his father's white customers
refused to own up to a \$2,000 debt owed to the family,
which threw the Chambers family into an immediate financial quandary.

And when his father, William, went door to door to the few white lawyers in town,
seeking help to collect the monies owed to him so that his son could go on to school,
one by one, each turned him away.

So at that point, at the age of 13, Julius Chambers says he heard the call to practice law.

I have been thrown into a sense of wonder lately by the death of this giant
in the civil rights movement because I was thrown into the path of *his calling*
from the minute I was born on the cusp of 1954,
the year of the landmark legislation, *Brown v. the Board of Education*,
which declared segregated education of our public schools unconstitutional.
I've been thrown into wondering if there is any correlation between the fact
that I was born on the cusp of that particular year, 1954,
or the fact that I got my first pair of glasses in 1964,
the same year that President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law,
because from that point on, I began to look at the world very differently.
Was this just serendipity or was it a change-up pitch from God?

I think I've mentioned this poem before in a sermon, but I will read it to you again
because it is about transformed vision, and I think repetition wouldn't hurt us.
It's called "When I Met My Muse," by William Stafford, the 1970-71 US Poet Laureate:

I glanced at her and took my glasses
off – they were still singing. They buzzed
like a locust on the coffee table and then
ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the
sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch, and
knew that nails up there took a new grip
on whatever they touched. "I am your own
way of looking at things," she said. "When
you allow me to live with you, every
glance at the world around you will be
a sort of salvation." And I took her hand.

—William Stafford

The staunch Calvinist in me can't help but think that the Sovereign Lord,
who throws children like Josiah and Jeremiah into the world with a purpose in mind,

might have thrown a child like me into this world in Charlotte, NC,
in the turbulent '50s and '60s for a reason, too.

Have you ever wondered about that, what we call *the accident of our birth*:
the date, place, time, circumstance, name given, people around us
specific and unique to us only?

Is it an accident or is it part of a greater plan for our lives that calls us to
put on our God-glasses and glance at the world around us
to find *our particular calling in the here and now?*

From your *Sitz im Leben*, from your setting, from your context, from your non-accidental birth,
what might God be calling you to do?

I knew of Julius Chamber, growing up in the '60s in Charlotte.

I heard that he had graduated at the top of his law class at UNC
and was the first black editor of the NC Law Review.

I heard that he formed and practiced in an integrated law firm in Charlotte,
and that he was the legal champion and mouthpiece for real integration,
not just token integration, of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools.

I also heard, as a child, that his name meant trouble for children like me.

In my parents' circle of friends, I heard his name whispered under one's breath with disdain,
alongside names like Reginald Hawkins, James McMillan, Martin Luther King, Jr.,
and phrases like "up to no good" and "troublemakers."

And when he took the case to the Supreme Court called *Swann v. the Charlotte-
Mecklenburg Board of Education* and won an order that affirmed the use
of cross-town busing to overcome residential segregation
and achieve racial integration of the public schools,

I knew that my friends and I were in for a rough bus ride, and so was he.

I heard that his car had been bombed, that his home had been dynamited,
and his office fire-bombed in his fight to follow through with his tenacity for justice.

But Chambers persevered with the task which the Lord had thrown him.

And my view, my vision of racial equality has been completely transformed over my lifetime
because God begat a little white girl in a particular place and time

and threw Julius Chambers into my life when I was a child
in a way that has been deeply influential and transformative for me.
Because God threw this prophetic figure in my path, my life has been a gradual
deliverance from the sin of segregation since birth, really.
I wasn't in Washington, DC, on August 28, 1963 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. I know some of you were.
God didn't throw me in the direct path of that famous prophet.

But God did throw another powerful prophetic figure my way, and I can't help
but think I'm a better person having experienced his influence first hand.
The word of the Lord is disruptive, and that can be very discomfiting and uncomfortable
to its recipient and to those in his or her sphere of influence.
The Lord hurls a word our way, the universe wrinkles,
and its moral arc bends towards justice as Dr. King once said,
which can pain us like a greenstick fracture.

A second thing that we glean from the Jeremiah narrative, however,
is that when the Lord throws a person into a calling, a difficult calling,
the Lord throws that person into a position of total dependency.
Nobody else but Yahweh God knows the trouble he or she will see.

Nobody else understands the weight or responsibility of bearing the consequences
of that calling upon oneself and perhaps upon one's family, too.
No one else shares the prophet's exact same calling to lead at all cost:
to go where the Lord sends and to say *whatever* the Lord commands one to say.
No one else understands the absolute terror involved in being appointed to
herald the uprooting of old ways of being in the world,
the tearing down of old systems that no longer work for the good of all,
the destruction of old relationships that are unequal in their balance of power,
the overthrowing of the *obliviousness* of one group of people for another.
Psalm 71 imagines the kickback from the powerful, the controlling, the moneyed,
when the Lord's servant goes and speaks the words that raise hackles
and spark violent responses:

"Deliver me, O God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the evil and cruel ones," the Psalmist implores.

"For you have been my hope,
O Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth.

From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb,
and I will ever praise you." (Psalm 71:4–6)

The total aloneness and total dependency upon God by the one called by God, thrown a task
by God, *is no mistake by God.*

It ensures the empowerment of the prophet to champion God's twin tasks
of destroying some things that no longer serve God's purposes,
and in their place, building and planting new things
that ultimately will transform the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of our Lord.

As difficult as it is for the child Jeremiah to hear the four verbs of commissioning
from God that connote destruction – pluck up, pull down, destroy, and overthrow –
his hope and impetus is in those last two verbs that fall from God's lips,
build and plant, connoting restoration.

The vision which the Lord builds in the prophet's heart and plants in his brain
is of a future when God will be reconciled with God's people and when
God's people will realize reconciliation with one another.

In the end, all will be well, whether it is immediately visible to the prophet or not.
Total reliance, total dependency upon God requires that trust, that confidence.

And finally, when the Lord throws a calling towards us, the Lord throws us a life-line, as well.
The Lord says to the boy/child, Jeremiah, "Do not be afraid of them;
I am with you to deliver you."

This is the promise of God's presence with those called to lead in God's community.
This is the promise that a child needs to hear, who is hurled in the morning darkness
towards a new school on a bus: *do not be afraid; I am with you.*

This is the promise that a youth needs to hear, who is pitched into a cafeteria of unknowns
and scans the crowd for a familiar face: *do not be afraid; I am with you.*

This is the promise that a young divorcee needs to hear, who is slung back

into the dot-com dating world: *do not be afraid; I am with you.*

This is the promise that a young father needs to hear, who is catapulted into joblessness with children to dress and feed: *do not be afraid; I am with you.*

This is the promise that an older adult needs to hear, who is heaved a heavy diagnosis with medical intervention required: *do not be afraid; I am with you.*

This is the promise that an underpaid teacher needs to hear, who is lobbed into an uber-sized, sparsely-resourced classroom:
do not be afraid; I am with you.

This is the promise that a church needs to hear, which is thrown a new minister and is anxious about what is to come: *do not be afraid; I am with you.*

The weight of the biblical witness seems to suggest this:

sometimes the Lord throws us a prophetic calling,
and sometimes the Lord throws us into the prophet's path.

Either way, Jesus is God with us, for us, building us into a spiritual house, planting us as a hopeful people in the heart of the place where we live, move and have our being.

May our particular presence here on the corner of Roxboro and Main be no accident, but may we put on our God-glasses and see
the fearful and wonderful things that God is calling, equipping,
commissioning, and accompanying us to do and to be this year and forward.



Let us pray: Lord, you came as a child to lead us toward your kingdom. We thank you for the dreams of the young. Fill us with wonder and give us a childlike audacity, even in the face of trials and persecution, to believe in another world despite the evidence around us, and to watch (with new vision) the evidence change. Amen.

(Claiborne, Wilson-Hartgrove, Okoro. *Common Prayer*. August 13)

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