

# Alan Baughcum

Sermon: The Power of God's Word in Our Mouths  
St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio  
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Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 13:10-17

Our two Scripture readings today do not seem to have much in common. A very young Jeremiah is called by God to be God's prophets. Jesus reaches out to a woman and heals her.

Let me offer a couple of similarities. First, they were initiated by God. Jeremiah did not, as far as we know, seek out God and ask God to make him a prophet. Indeed, Jeremiah seems, as have many called to mission and ministry by God, protested that there were good reasons why God should not do what God intended. In Jeremiah's case, he protested that he was too young.

It didn't work of course ... never does ... God is not interested in our excuses, especially if we protest our weaknesses. Why? Because God's strength is more than enough to compensate for any weaknesses or problems that we see with God's plan.

God put God's words in Jeremiah's mouth. And God's word was powerful. God told Jeremiah: "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."

God's words must be really powerful! And it was God who initiated the encounter with Jeremiah.

Similarly, it was Jesus who initiated the encounter with the woman who was so bent over that she could not stand up straight. The woman did not ask Jesus for healing. It is Jesus, whom we believe to be the Son of God and very God, who saw the woman, had compassion, and healed her. Jesus, God, initiated. Jesus spoke God's words of healing and laid hands upon her. She was healed. Only then did she speak, now standing straight up, in order to praise God. Jesus initiated and his words were really powerful ... powerful enough to undo 18 years of suffering.

As we get older and look back on our lives, it is sometimes funny what we remember from our faith journey that helped us. I spent nearly six years going to seminary and absorbed a huge volume of information from books, journal articles, scripture commentaries and lectures from my professors. And yet one of the moments that has stuck with me was a very brief story told by Professor of Church History, Doug Strong, during an interlude in his lecture.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union Professor Strong taught at a seminary in Moscow. Remember that under the rule of the Communists in the Soviet Union, it was forbidden for people to have a Bible. They were kept under lock and key, hidden away in various libraries.

Professor Strong told the story of a young man who entered such a library and found a hidden copy of the Bible, covered with spider webs and dust. The young man began reading the Book of

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Galatians in the New Testament. There is so much wonderful material in that book including 2:16 (in part) ... we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ ...

And those fabulous words of freedom and equality in Gal 3:26-28: "... for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

The words that the young man read in Galatians led him to faith in Christ and to become a student in that seminary in Moscow where Prof. Strong taught. Having grown up under Communism and having been taught to believe that there was no God ... yet the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, words put into Paul by God and shared by Paul in his letter to the church in Galatia, those words were so powerful that they completely turned the young man's life around.

In addition to the similarities between the two Scripture readings, i.e., God moves in human history to initiate change, and God's words are powerful, I want to make one more argument. God's powerful words are accessible. Accessible to us. Accessible to us in the Scriptures today.

And we do not fully appreciate the power of God's word. I am not the only one who has had this thought. Annie Dillard, one of my favorite authors, wrote this about Christians and Christianity in her book, *Teaching A Stone to Talk* ...

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Think about all the instances in the Scripture where the existing power structure and usual expectations were overturned. Start with the Exodus story where the least powerful, the Hebrew slaves, were able to leave despite with the wishes of the Pharaoh, powerful ruler of one of the world's powerful empires. God's word, "Let my people go," was more powerful than Egypt's Pharaoh. Moses records the event in Deuteronomy 26:8 "And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm ..."

And, of course, the greatest overturning of all in the mission and ministry of Jesus, a wandering carpenter preaching the coming of the Kingdom of God. The Temple in Jerusalem had become a hugely powerful economic institution by offering worshipers the opportunity, for a fee, to

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exchange their local currencies for the Temple's money to purchase birds and animals for sacrifice. The authorities and moneychangers were more interested in turning a profit than in obeying God's commandments that they pursue justice. Jesus took a whip and literally drove them out of the Temple. And that was when the final decision was made by those in charge to seek Jesus' death.

Oh, yes, Jesus' death ... how did that work out? Jesus was condemned to death by authorities empowered by the most powerful empire in the world at the time. Jesus was condemned to execution by the most painful and shameful method that the Roman Empire had devised, death by crucifixion on the cross. And Jesus was crucified and buried.

But on the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead back to life. More than mere human life, Jesus then ascended to eternal life at God's right hand, interceding on our behalf.

Not only was the power of the Roman Empire undone, the very power of death ... something from which none of us escape ... the very power of death was undone. God and God's word are more powerful than the most powerful empires and more powerful than the most inevitable of natural forces, death.

More recently, it was the power of God's word that moved Great Britain to outlaw slavery in the 19th century. It was the power of God's word that moved black folks and white folks in this country to overturn a century of Jim Crow laws that had extended the oppression of slavery from several centuries previously. It was the power of God's word that moved the people of South Africa to outlaw its own apartheid system that essentially kept black folks in servitude.

God is calling us today to use the power of God's word against the powerful institutions and forces that oppress. And too often, Christians sound like Jeremiah when God called him to mission. "Wait! You've made a mistake. We are just a little country church ... there isn't anything we can do. We are too small and too weak." I have heard a version of those words in every one of the small churches in which I have preached.

Again, it is not a matter of how small and weak we are. It is a matter of how powerful God is.

There are no shortages of problems in the world, and I am not smart enough to know which is the worst or most immanent. So, let's focus on a single problem.

I want to talk about the problem of power and the use of violence to achieve world-dominating power. Russia under Putin wants to put together the Russian Empire and perhaps even reconstitute the Soviet Union. Why? Because Russia has been invaded so many times over the years that Putin (and a lot of other Russians) think that Russia needs to be big enough and strong enough to deter invasion.

Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party remembers the 19th and 20th centuries as years of weakness and oppression by other countries in Asia and by the West. It wants to retake Taiwan

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and strengthen itself internally in order to erase the shame it remembers, perhaps accurately, perhaps not.

Lastly, but not least, the radical elements of Islam want to destroy Israel (and pretty much Jews generally) as well as destroy Western civilization. Why? Because in their view, Allah should control not only our religious life but every other aspect of life as well. There is no room in radical Islam for the notion that secular government should have its domain and religion a separate domain. And because of that separation, radical Islamists believe the West is fundamentally sinful and decadent.

I could also include the United States in this listing of countries seeking power. There are those among us who want enough power so that we just do not have to concern ourselves with matters outside our borders. The goal is to be economically and militarily strong enough to just tell the rest of the world to go about its business and leave us alone. At the other extreme are those among us who are convinced that the U. S. has all the answers and should exercise its power to remake the rest of the world in its image.

Can St. Michael's UCC solve this worldwide problem? No, not by itself.

But we can be part of the solution, and we can work towards eradicating the striving for power and the use of violence to achieve power. We can work with other churches and with interfaith organizations and with other groups and governments, joining together in the name of the God of Israel to confront and overcome the problem.

Bible study and education are a big part of the solution to the problem, convincing others that God should be at the center of our communal life. Striving for power and the use of violence to achieve power should not be at the center of our communal life.

Even where we cannot convince others that God should be at the center, we can work together to build trust and to forge strong and loving relationships. That trust and those relationships can help us tackle big but smaller problems such as hunger, lack of education, lack of housing, polluted air and land and water, and so many more. Working together to solve smaller problems can give us the will and the courage to tackle the biggest of our problems.

Each small step we take, individually and as Christian congregations is a witness to God's power. Each step can be multiplied by God's power to achieve what we cannot achieve on our own.

Let God's word initiate mission and ministry among us to tackle even the biggest problems the world faces. It doesn't matter if we cannot see how it will all work and come together to reduce the striving for power and the use of violence. God can see it. God can use our efforts, even when they are halting and sometimes seemingly ineffective, to achieve God's purposes.

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Remember the Scriptures, Romans 8:28. Paul writes “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Let us pray: Holy God, lift us up from the dust and raise our eyes to see the power of your word. Initiate in us the will to tackle even the biggest of the world’s problems. Help us to see that you can achieve things we can’t even imagine. Help us to see that you want us to be your helpmates, adding our efforts and our abilities to the cause. Help us to see that you can knit together our works with the power of your word to accomplish what seems impossible, an end to the struggle for power and the use of violence to achieve power.

Amen.