January 30, 2022 ~4th Sunday after the Epiphany

*Now I have put my words in your mouth* Jeremiah 1:9

Amen.

*Now I have put my words in your mouth.* This is the scripture passage that I have selected for this week from our Bible readings. The passage for you to learn hopefully by heart. When God called the prophet Jeremiah into service as a prophet, the Lord spoke to the teenage Jeremiah and put out his hand and touched Jeremiah’s mouth and said to him:

*Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

One of the many interactions that I love with babies is to feed them. I enjoyed feeding my own children when they were little. Their sweet mouths would open in delight as I fed them sweet apricots and bananas. I continue to have the same joy with my grandchildren although only the youngest, Oliver, is the grandchild still needing to be helped to eat. I had the privilege to feed Oliver, wearing a monogrammed bib with the name *Thomas* that I had saved for decades, when we visited Oliver Finland last October. I put the food in his mouth, knowing that this nourishment would enable Oliver to grow big and strong.

God did the same things for Jeremiah, not with physical food but with spiritual food. God told Jeremiah that he knew him even before he was born. God knows you and me even before we were born. God calls Jeremiah to be one of his prophets but Jeremiah, like you and me, has reservations about the responsibility being put on him and so Jeremiah cries out to God: *You can’t pick me. I do not have a golden tongue. I don’t know the words to say. I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.*

God replies with this response: *Do not say, I am only a boy.* God then upholds Jeremiah and touches his mouth and says the prophetic words, *Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

Jeremiah becomes a great prophet in the 6th century BCE. He prophesies at a time of great uncertainty and struggles, when the Babylonians invade Jerusalem in 586 BC and destroy the great temple built by King Solomon hundreds of years earlier.

What else do we know about Jeremiah?

He is known as the weeping prophet. Note not the crying prophet but the weeping prophet because of the grief Jeremiah experienced over the people of Judah turning away from God. The people’s sins filled Jeremiah with intense anguish. But in the midst of all these real struggles, Jeremiah never loses hope in God’s promise. It is wartime and yet Jeremiah buys property, a large field (Jeremiah 32) as a physical sign of the power of God’s restoration. Jeremiah is known for writing that God has loved us *with an everlasting love* (Jeremiah 31:3) and that the Lord will write God’s law on the hearts of the people *and I will be their God and they shall be my people* (Jer 31:33).

God always lives up to his promises and he certainly puts words in the mouth of Jeremiah.

God is always desiring to put words in our mouth NOW.

Let’s go to the episode of Jesus returning home to Nazareth after his baptism. Jesus has been tempted for 40 days in the wilderness, and he has begun his ministry with his 12 disciples. Jesus has been teaching and healing. Everyone in his hometown is excited to see the local boy made good. However, the visit doesn’t go as planned by the townspeople of Nazareth. It is Saturday, the Sabbath, and Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah. He then sits down to preach and the people are delighted with his messages and they are very proud of him. We can see the headlines now: *Local boy returns home to do miracles! The carpenter’s son is going places! 7 blind people receive their sight!*

However, the scenario doesn’t unfold the way people were expecting. Jesus picks up on their pressure to have him do what they want, which is to perform miracles. He doesn’t believe that their hearts are soft and filled with faith. And so Jesus names it clearly. *Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.* Jesus then goes on to tell two episodes in the life of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. These episodes are about the prophets doing miracles with non-Jewish people, the gentiles. Elijah blesses the widow at Zarephath with never-ending food during a famine, and Elisha heals Naaman of his serious skin condition.

The people now become very angry because Jesus, the hometown boy, won’t perform on command. Their anger is so intense that it becomes RAGE! They drive Jesus out of the synagogue, out of the town and go up to the top of a hill. The mob mentality is so intense that they wish to kill their hometown boy by throwing Jesus off the cliff.

Imagine the words coming out of their mouths, words of anger, words of rage, that incited the crowd and drove them towards murder. Now, God did not put the words in their mouth. The people had definitely turned away from God.

Here’s what they might have said: *Who does it think he is? He owes us! How dare he tell the stories of gentiles receiving miracles. We are God’s chosen people. We invited him here to speak in the synagogue and this is how he treats us. This is wrong. This is impossible. His arrogance is out of control. We must take the law into our own hands and get rid of this imposter.*

What happens next? Is Jesus thrown off the cliff? No. All we know from Luke’s gospel is that Jesus passes through the middle of the crowd and leaves Nazareth. As far as we know, this is the last visit of Jesus to his hometown. That is it.

What a shame that on the sabbath, the people do not ask for God to put the words in their mouths ~ words of support, words of love, words of humility, words of compassion, words of understanding.

The Bible warns us about the dangers of anger. Here are some specific instructions from scripture:

*Refrain from anger and forsake wrath* Psalm 37:8

*Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.* Proverbs 14:29

*Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention.*  Proverbs 15:18

*One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty.*

Proverbs 16:32

*But you must get rid of all such things…. Anger…. from your mouth.*

Colossians 3:8

*My beloved, let everyone be … slow to anger for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.*  James 1:19-20

Anger is spiritually dangerous. I have watched the nicest people turn to a completely different and dark side of themselves when they become angry. Their world narrows and all they can see is their own viewpoint and they speak, not with God’s words put into their mouth, but with the words of darkness. Their anger usually stems from a situation in which they feel they have been hurt, wronged, not paid attention to. Afterwards when they have calmed down, they don’t even remember the extent of their words that they have splashed all over. They feel fine and they speak with God’s words once again. But the recipients of the anger remember the words and the hurt will stay with them.

That is why crowds can become so dangerous and that is why police officers were sent from all across Canada, including our own OPP, to Ottawa this weekend just in case the freedom truckers protest got out of control.

Our invitation on this the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany is to remember what God wishes to do for you and me NOW. God wishes to put the words in our mouth for any situation and for any time. At our eucharist this morning for the breaking of the bread, we will use the beautiful words from scripture: *Taste and see that the Lord is good. Happy are they who trust in him.* (Psalm 34:8)

As believers, we have this marvellous opportunity to let our loving God direct all our words. God will give us the right words to say.

***Now, I have put my words in your mouth.***

Amen.