

UNLEARN

sermon preached at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Medina, WA
by Josh Hosler, Associate for Christian Formation
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At the beginning of my freshman year in college, my music professor took me aside and explained to me that I was holding my trumpet the wrong way. It seems I was gripping it so tightly that I was jamming it into my face, and not even dead center on my face, but a little off to the right. She showed me a better way to hold it and insisted that I work on changing my habit.

I thought to myself, “This isn’t fair! I’ve been playing the trumpet for six years. If the way I hold my horn is such a big deal, why hasn’t anybody told me about it before?” I felt judged, and this frustrated me. I didn’t want to have to unlearn what was ingrained so deeply. In the scheme of things, this experience seems like no big deal, but at the time it really upset me.

Have you had a similar experience? Have you ever had to unlearn something in order to relearn it correctly? Or have you ever been the teacher who insisted that somebody else unlearn?

The Biblical prophets were teachers of that sort for the people of Israel and Judah. They were caring—but very tough—professors. We can tell they cared because we can read about how angry they got. You know, getting angry about something really means that you care about it deeply. If you didn’t care, it wouldn’t affect you.

In our first reading today, we heard from the Book of Baruch. Baruch was a prophet who lived in the 6th century B.C. In fact, he was Jeremiah’s scribe and sidekick. The two of them lived and worked in the time when the southern kingdom, Judah, became overshadowed by the nation of Babylon.

We may need a little history lesson here. On Thursday, I popped in on St. Thomas School’s morning chapel, where Lex was explaining to the assembled group of 3rd to 6th graders the politics of that exact time and place. He told them that the prophets’ job was to correct people when they forgot how to live the way God wanted them to. The people had been given the Law, which can be summed up in two rules: “Love God,” and “Love

your neighbor.” But the people kept selfishly putting themselves first, ignoring God and trampling on the poor and disadvantaged in their midst.

One prophet after another tried to warn the people of Israel. But first the kingdom was ruled by a series of bad kings—as Lex said, “King after king came along, and they were all just plain dumb!” The kingdom split into a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah, which housed Jerusalem and the Temple. Eventually, the Assyrians took over Israel. But the Judeans kept living unjustly, and that’s when Jeremiah and Baruch issued their stern warnings.

I imagine the people might have felt, on a grand scale, a little like I felt when my professor tried to get me to unlearn. Why should I unlearn? That would mean admitting I’d been wrong all this time! I’d rather be comfortable in my ignorance than work *that* hard.

Finally, the Babylonians poured into Jerusalem. They carried the country’s leaders, scholars, and gifted people into captivity in Babylon. They looted the valuables from the Temple and burned it to the ground.

At this point in chapel, Lex asked the kids, “Have you ever been on ‘time out’?” Nearly every hand shot up. Lex said, “The Exile in Babylon was like the entire nation being on ‘time out’ for fifty years.” That hit home. Some of the kids chuckled, but they all understood.

Lex asked, “What do you do when you’re on ‘time out’?”

The answers were illuminating: “I can’t do anything I want to do, so I have to sit there and think about why I’m on ‘time out’ in the first place.” “I sit and stare at the wall.” And then a girl named Karsyn said, “I spend the time writing.”

I lit up when I heard that, because I’ve seen my own daughter give herself “time outs.” When she gets really angry, she may well say, “Just leave me alone!” And I’m happy to oblige. Sometimes if I wait a few minutes and then check on her again, she’s drawing a picture or playing something creative with her stuffed animals, or just sitting quietly and thinking.

Lex lit up, too. He replied to Karsyn: “You write? Wonderful! You use the ‘time out’ to reflect on the experience and allow something creative to come out of it. And that’s exactly what the Jews did. During the Exile, they produced amazing writings:

many of the Psalms and other books of the Bible were written in Babylon. They didn't waste their 'time out.' They used it to unlearn what they had learned wrong. They used it to grow up."

Baruch may have been one of those writers. Although the authorship and age of his book are disputed, it is written from the perspective of exile and offers fresh words of hope: "Take off the garment of sorrow and affliction ... put on the robe of righteousness that comes from God ... God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him."

Had the people of Judah listened to Baruch and Jeremiah earlier, they might have given themselves a "time out." But they didn't. Still, they used their "time out" to do the work they needed to do to "get right with God" again ... to become righteous.

As I was looking over the readings for this week, that word kept popping out at me: "righteous." The word "righteous" or "righteousness" was used five times in our readings this morning. That's because the season of Advent, the words of the Prophets, and the task of unlearning all have to do with righteousness.

But "righteousness" is a code word, isn't it? It's one of those Christian words that mean something different on the outside than on the inside. Outside the Church, it's often used sarcastically: "Oh, excuse me, Mr. Righteous!" Or it's a petty insult: "I wish she'd quit acting so righteous." But when people say these things, they really mean "self-righteous," don't they? They mean someone who is smugly moralistic and annoying. This could describe the people of Jerusalem just before the Babylonians swept in: "Oh, it's OK. We're the Chosen People. We know God is on our side. God would never allow anything bad to happen to *us*." It could also describe the Pharisees in the time of John the Baptist: "We have Abraham as our ancestor!"

Being righteous means something different. It means truly being in right relationship with God. In the Christian sense, it's implied that this happens through little or no effort of our own. If you go back and look at Abraham or any of the other heroes of the Bible, you won't find saintly, perfect people. You'll find deeply flawed people who had their doubts, but who decided to trust God anyway. Abraham, Moses, David ... they all share that profile. They are our models for righteousness. Their story is our story. We have all acted dishonestly like Abraham, lashed out in anger like Moses, and been as full

of ourselves as David. But when we make mistakes, we repent of them and try again, trying to be as gentle with ourselves as God has been. When we doubt, we are to acknowledge those doubts and then trust God anyway.

Paul prayed that the church in Philippi would grow in self-knowledge and produce a “harvest of righteousness.” I love this image, because it implies the very work we need to do. We need to get to know ourselves better, cultivating ourselves like a good crop, tending our souls with gentle care throughout the green growing season that we call life. And even then, for all our sweat and toil, what we gain is not righteousness itself but a perspective from which we recognize that righteousness has been ours all along. That is what John the Baptist means when he says, “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Lex told us in last week’s sermon that the old world has to end before the new one can be born. That’s what Advent is for. We have been given four weeks as an opportunity for a “time out.” I’ve heard it said that Americans only slow down when they get sick. There’s certainly enough of that going around this year! But why wait for a virus? Will you give yourself a “time out” before Christmas? Will you recognize your need to slow down and reflect on the tough stuff in your life, before it knocks you flat? Will you stop doing something, just until Christmas, in order to free up some time?

Once you’ve freed up the time, use it in one of two ways—and I recommend that you use it in the way that feels *less* comfortable to you. Use it to help others—either by putting extra caring into a Christmas present, or feeding the hungry, or something else that is outside yourself.

Either that, or take the other route: *waste* the time. Use it to do absolutely nothing. That’s more uncomfortable than it sounds! Don’t fill up the time like you would habitually, with music or list-making or surfing the Web. Unlearn all that! Just sit quietly and listen. Or go for a long walk and listen. It may be that God is trying to speak a new truth into your heart.

Don’t be surprised if that truth contains an element of judgment and requires you to unlearn something. And don’t be surprised if that truth is more like announcement. It may be that a new reality is about to be born in you. Will you help prepare the way? Amen.