

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany
Cycle C RCL

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah's career began in the same year (627 BCE) as the death of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria. Under King the Judean king Josiah, Judah experienced a brief rebirth as Assyrian power over the Middle East began to evaporate. This revival, however, ended with the death of Josiah in 609 BCE at Megiddo as he tried to defeat the Egyptian army that was headed north to finish off the last vestiges of the Assyrian army, an army Josiah saw as a buffer between Judah and Babylon. During the course of his ministry, Jeremiah watched the Babylonians take his neighbors off from Jerusalem to Babylon twice, in 597 BCE and in 586 BCE. Shortly after this second expulsion Jeremiah fled to Egypt. Jeremiah's prophecy is unusual for a southern prophet because of his interest in the Exodus and Conquest traditions and his relative disinterest in the so-called "royal theology" associated with the kingship in Jerusalem. The current passage is a "call narrative," in which the editor tries to relate the nature of the prophet's ministry. These first verses reveal him to be the reluctant prophet he turns out to be elsewhere in the book.

Psalms 71:1-6

The first three verses of Psalm 71 closely resemble Psalm 31:1-3a. Indeed, many phrases in the psalm are reminiscent of other psalms, including Psalms 22, 25-26, 31, *etc.* The psalm resembles most closely the *individual lament* form, but there are also elements of the hymn as well (Psalm 71:22-24). The present lament is more explicit than most in emphasizing the problems of old age (Psalm 71:17-21); but as often in the laments, the psalmist begs relief from the activities of enemies (Psalm 71:4, 10-13). Closely associated with these problems are the accusations of the psalmist's enemies. Today's reading (Psalm 71:1-6) consists solely of material of the *lament* form.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The magical papyri give us many examples of ecstatic speech which amounts to nothing more than the repetition of endless series of vowels and diphthongs together with occasional words and phrases borrowed indiscriminately from Aramaic and/or Egyptian for their magical effect. The phenomenon of tongues in earliest Christianity may have been similar to this. The difficulty Paul faced in Corinth was the exercise of spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues to prove that one belonged to a superior Christian order than those who did not manifest such gifts. There is some reason to believe that 1 Corinthians 13 was an independent composition, reused here to support Paul's claim that the highest and most important "gift" is that of love.

Luke 4:21-30

The author of Luke has here expanded the saying of Jesus he found in Mark 6:4 about prophets not receiving honor in their own country. In our passage, Jesus refers his audience to the stories of Elijah and the woman of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:1-16) and Elisha's cure of the Syrian (2 Kings 5:1-14) to the effect that even these great prophets could not do great works in their own country. Evidently, this comparison was sufficiently distasteful to those in attendance to make them attack Jesus as a blasphemer. The punishment for blasphemy in Jewish law is stoning, accomplished by throwing the victim off a high cliff and then finishing him off by dropping heavy stones on him if he is still alive after the fall. The crowd attempts to inflict this punishment on Jesus (Luke 4:29) but without success.