I have to admit that when I saw the readings for today I thoroughly regretted saying yes to preaching this morning. I tried looking for that soothing and uplifting nugget to turn into a nice summertime sermon you could all take on your journeys this week. But no go! So bear with me here when I tell you what I personally took away from the lectionary readings this week.

**Truth-tellers are a nuisance! Truth-tellers are a nuisance!**

The other night I was listening to a podcast by one of my favorite political commentators, Rachel Maddow. Now, don’t get worried; I’m not going to go all crazy liberal MSNBC on you! Rachel reminds me a lot of the late radio personality Paul Harvey, in that she tells a great story and I always learn something about our country and it’s history I never knew before. Often I don’t know quite where she is going with the story until she gets to her main point, but walking the road with her is never boring.

This particular evening, she started her show with a story about traffic jams in downtown Denver, CO on July 5th and 6th, 1978. In an act of civil disobedience, disabled women and men, some confined to wheelchairs, many of them getting out of their chairs and lying down on the street, surrounded public buses.

The protestors, who essentially took the public transportation system hostage, chanted “WE WILL RIDE” and sported stickers on their wheelchairs with the slogans, “Taxation Without Transportation” and “To Boldly Go Where Everyone Else Has Gone Before”. That non-violent action on those two days in July 1978, marked the birth of the disability rights movement.

So let me reiterate……**truth-tellers are a nuisance**. It is likely that some who heard the voices of those protestors and simply passed them off as so much ambient noise….. nothing to pay attention to…..just a temporary disturbance in the force. Others may have seen the justice gap that existed for people that paid taxes toward public transportation and could not use it, but couldn’t reconcile the budgetary gap.

Telling the truth wasn't easy. It took hours and days and months and years of people continually advocating for the freedom of movement in public places and release from the restrictions of institutional living. And finally in 1990, of the Americans With Disabilities Act was passed and signed into law; fourteen years after people left their wheelchairs and laid their bodies in front of buses. Their work continues…..

Jeremiah’s lament today is another example of a voice crying out and being drowned out by the prevailing winds. Poor Jeremiah was caught between a rock and a hard place. God had called him to speak prophecy to the people of Israel about the growing threat of the Babylonians. God told him when he was called as a prophet, that the people would fight against him, but God promised, “They will not prevail, for I am with you.”

But at this point in time, Jeremiah has just about had it. Just before this passage we read today, Jeremiah spent time in the stocks, a method of punishment and humiliation before the people. His friends are sick and tired of hearing his cries of “Violence and Destruction.” And, to be honest, Jeremiah is sick and tired of his own voice. No one seems to be listening. For Jeremiah, prophet of the Lord God, **truth-telling is more than a nuisance!**

And even if Jeremiah decided to give up his day job, he can’t. The truth is planted so deep within him; if he stays quiet he is in pain. Listen to the powerful agony of his cry. *“If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak anymore in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in and I cannot.”* But Jeremiah shows us that lament, and even anger at God, is not the opposite of faith in God. Jeremiah served God faithfully for forty years (!) in spite of himself and for the sake of the people of God loves.

Looking at the collection of Jesus’ sayings to his disciples today, we might wonder, as *“Where is the Good News in all that”*? Does Jesus really advocate the fracturing of families and raising of swords? Did Matthew miss Jesus’ message of peace that John expresses so beautifully in that gospel?

Well actually, at the time when Matthew is writing down this gospel, somewhere around 70CE, talking about peace is not high on the agenda. There has been a Jewish uprising and, in retaliation, the Romans have destroyed the Temple. There is great concern in the community of Jews in Jerusalem to keep things under control and under the radar of the Roman Empire. This is the 911 of their time and security measures and paranoia are at an all time high. Anyone displaying behavior not within the norm would be under great scrutiny. And so the People of the Way, those first Christians are under considerable pressure to fall into place and to not make waves of any kind.

Jesus’ words were originally given to his disciples as part of his instruction to prepare them for missionary work. These are hard lessons to absorb. His disciples would have known something of the strife they might encounter. They had been hanging around with Jesus after all and they knew he had become a nuisance to the authorities.

And, Matthew’s community would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about, because it was happening to them. In their own here and now, many of them had been cut off from their families; Parents disowning children and siblings on opposite sides of issues, all for proclaiming the truth they had come to know in Christ.

But in the midst of their troubles these Christ followers were learning how to live as a community of believers, a community that supported each other, ate together, and created their own sense of family. Much of what they were doing was radical in the eyes of the authorities and of their families and friends. Many were persecuted as a result. And yet, they persisted in their love of Jesus, believing that in the end, God would bring all things into that love, including those from whom they were estranged.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry recently offered this encouragement for Episcopalians to try-on being a truth-telling nuisance.

He suggested that Episcopalians ought to look to the biblical hero Esther for a model. Set during the time of Jewish exile in Persia, she was initially seen as the beautiful, obedient, and relatively passive woman who was queen to the king of Persia. She came to believe that she was called to save her people and used rhetoric to persuade the king to save her Jewish people living in exile in Persia. It’s significant that up until that point, she had not revealed her Jewish identity.

He went on….“I say this with all humility, I really do: Perhaps this Episcopal Church has come to the kingdom for such a time as this,”

He said part of the Episcopal Church’s vocation is to bear witness to a way of being Christian that actually looks something like Jesus of Nazareth. “It is…… a way of being Christian that dares to follow Jesus, to love the way of Jesus,” giving and forgiving as Jesus did while loving justice and mercy and walking humbly before God.

Bishop Curry, saying he feared he might be treading on dangerous ground, urged Episcopalians to listen to the [rhetoric that swirls around us][[1]](#footnote-1) with what might be called biblically-informed ears. “When you sometimes listen to voices that portend to represent Christianity in our public life and public sphere, listen carefully to what is said and what is not,” he said. Do you hear the words of the Sermon on the Mount, or Matthew 25, the summary of the law or Jesus’ words at the Last Supper about love and serving others?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Here’s the truth about truth-tellers. It’s tempting to ignore them, reject them and punish them, but God continues to send them among us. When our faith causes a burning in our bones to carry truth into the light, we may try to ignore it. It may not make us particularly comfortable, but there will be others that will join with us.

I like what Rev. Jamie had to say last week about rising up as a church to provide healthy snacks for kids in our community. She suggested that we might invite others to join us in that ministry; that by initiating that one action, we might enter into deeper conversations about service and the problems that face us. Those things, once spoken in the dark, might be raised up into the light, and truths uncovered might be shouted from the rooftops.

Now, I have declared that truth-tellers are a nuisance, and perhaps that is truer than not for those who are unwilling or unable to hear it yet. But, occasionally those prophets who come among us might even be celebrated, as a plaque in the Denver Public Library does. It commemorates the “Gang of 19” that laid their bodies down in the street in front of buses those two days in July of 1978. Those who were once ignored and derided have been raised up as heroes their community is proud of.

Even as Jeremiah laments, he sings a song of praise to the God of love. And Jesus reminds us, the fact remains that our fate is in the hands of the God that loves us, knows every hair on our head, and points us to walk the in way of truth and light.

1. My paraphrase. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nhepiscopalnews.org/blog/2017/6/12/presiding-bishop-michael-curry-tells-executive-council-episcopalians-are-called-to-behave-in-a-way-that-truly-resembles-the-way-of-jesus> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)