

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Jeremiah 1:4-10 (NRSV)

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
[5] "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

[6] Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." [7] But the Lord said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,

[8] Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,

says the Lord."

[9] Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,

"Now I have put my words in your mouth.

[10] 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."

A TROUBLED BOY

Several years ago a boy was born in Port Huron, Michigan. When he entered school, they estimated his I.Q. to be well below average. And after three months in school the little boy was forced to withdraw. School officials contended that he could not be taught.

The little boy's health was poor; he had scarlet fever and respiratory infections. And so he wasn't able to try school again until a few more years had passed.

At that time he was found to be going deaf, and his emotional problems were profound. Teachers described him as being stubborn and aloof. One day while playing with fire he even managed to burn down his father's barn!

On the bright side, the boy did show some mechanical ability. But, very few thought that he would amount to much. He had too many problems.

But, of course this a "Paul Harvey" type story. The boy did manage to become a success. You see this sickly, bad student was Thomas A. Edison, who would later become one of the world's greatest inventors.

GOD'S VIEW OF PEOPLE

Sometimes we are rather shortsighted in our evaluation of people. We look on the outside.

But, our Scripture for today tells us that God looks at people in a different way. God looks on the inside. God sees potential where we see only problems. God is able to use the most unlikely of people for the glory of his kingdom.

God is even able to use people like you and me.

I believe that God made each and every one of us for a purpose. We have a job to do. We have a special call. But, we are not always willing to accept or believe that.

Did you hear how the call of Jeremiah was described? God said, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Jeremiah was holy. That is, Jeremiah was “set apart” for a specific task. It’s the same word used when they talked about the tabernacle and its furnishings.

Just as God’s house was holy, set apart for a specific purpose, so Jeremiah’s life was holy. From the very beginning God had a plan for Jeremiah’s life. In fact before he was even born God knew that he was going to be his spokesman.

Many young couples when they are expecting a child have plans for that child. For example a father might proudly say, “My son is going to be a famous football player.” A mother might say, “My daughter is going to be a famous concert pianist.” Of course we know that these plans are only wishful thinking. We can’t determine what our children will be.

But, this passage suggests that this is not true with God. God had a plan for Jeremiah’s life before he was even born. Jeremiah’s life would not be about him and what he wanted to do. Jeremiah’s life would be about the message that God would speak through him. Jeremiah would be God’s mouthpiece.

EXCUSES

How would you respond if someone told you that your life had been planned for you before you were even born? How would you respond if someone told you that you were going to do a job that would be dangerous and thankless?

I suspect that you would react the same way that Jeremiah reacted. You would begin to offer excuses as to why you couldn’t do that job. Jeremiah said, “Lord, I haven’t had a chance to go to college and take Speech 101 yet. How in the world can you expect me to be your spokesman? I’m just a teen-ager.”

Jeremiah was very young when he received God’s call. His excuse was a valid one. He didn’t have any experience. Probably older people would not

take him seriously. His resume was nonexistent at this point. And so Jeremiah said, "I am only a child."

Unfortunately, I can't use youth and inexperience as an excuse any more, but I have other excuses at the ready whenever I think that God is pushing me to do a job that I don't want to do. Instead of saying I'm too young and inexperienced; I say that I'm too old and tired. I say something like, "You need a young person to do a job like that, God. Haven't you made a mistake when you tapped me for this task?"

Perhaps some of you think that you've deserved a time of rest. You've spent time at a younger age working with the Sunday school or the youth group. Now that you've retired it's time to take a sabbatical.

I hate to tell you this. With God's call there is no minimum or maximum age limit. None of us are too old or too young to be called.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

If you don't believe that, think about the story of Abraham and Sarah. Can you imagine being called to pick up everything you own, including your extended family and your servants and move to parts unknown at age seventy five? That's exactly what God called Abraham and Sarah to do.

They were in no shape for a trip into the desert. Just getting out of bed in the morning was enough of a challenge for them. And yet God called them to strike out on faith on the great journey of their life. God even said that he was going to make them the parents of a great nation.

Sarah was the practical one. She knew that some jobs were for the young to do. She did what any sane person would do. She laughed out loud. Abraham laughed too.

But, God's will was done. When Sarah had one foot in the grave, God put the other foot in the maternity ward! And so 100 year old Abraham and 90 year old Sarah had a child. His name was Isaac which means "he laughs".

It seems that God had the last laugh on this one. God always has the last laugh.

MOSES

I think one of the funniest stories in the Bible is the call of Moses. You remember that story. God came to Moses in the burning bush, and told him that he was going to Pharaoh, the leader of the ancient world and say, "Let my people go."

How did Moses respond? He responded much like Jeremiah. "Lord, I missed that Speech 101 class in college. I'm more the engineering type. Words aren't my forte.

Did you know that Mel Tillis is my first cousin? Stuttering runs in our family. Maybe you need to get someone else."

And the Lord said, "Who made your mouth?"

Don't bother making excuses when God calls you to do something. You see, the call of the Creator God always trumps our reluctance and our fears.

EXCUSES NOT ACCEPTED

And so it was with Jeremiah. God answered each of his objections. "You don't have any words for the occasion? Here, let me touch your mouth. I'll give you the words. You're worried about the dangers of the job you're going to do? Let me assure you that I'll protect you. No harm will come to you while I'm on your side."

As the apostle Paul once put it,

"If God is for us, who can be against us." If we're doing God's will, even the greatest enemy should not be feared. If we're speaking God's word, that word will have the desired effect.

The power comes not from our ability to get the job done. The power comes from the plan and purpose of God.

When God speaks things change and a new world is born.

A DIFFICULT CALL

That all sounds good, but we know that when we're in the difficult situation, when we are called to speak a word of truth that no one wants to hear, when (as Rudyard Kipling put it) everyone is losing their head and blaming it on us, then it's not so easy to believe. We wish that we had never opened our big mouth.

It takes great faith to believe in the call and promises of God when the tough times come. But, this was what Jeremiah was called to do, and this is what we are called to do as well.

I'm not surprised that Jeremiah was reluctant to be God's spokesman. His call was a particularly difficult one. He was called to proclaim a word of judgment in a time of war. He was called to tell God's people that they were being punished for their unfaithful ways.

No nation ever wants to hear that word. That would be interpreted as giving aid and comfort to the enemy. And yet that was the word that Jeremiah was called to preach.

I remember after the attacks of September 11 one of the famous televangelists had the temerity to suggest that those attacks were God's punishment because this country had been unfaithful. The public uproar was tremendous, and the evangelist soon recanted of his heretical message. He said that his words were taken "out of context."

But, Jeremiah had no such out. The message burned in his bones, and he preached a terrible word of judgment to an audience that was in no mood to hear that message.

And so Jeremiah suffered terribly at the hands of his people. He was called a false prophet. He was slapped around. He was placed in prison. He was threatened with death.

The king told his detractors to do what they wanted to with him, and so they threw him down a well. There was no water, but the ground was still wet at the bottom of the well. There he was all alone in the muck and the mire. And as Jeremiah looked up at the tiny light from above, he sunk deeper and deeper into the mud.

STUCK IN THE MUD

Isn't that a wonderful picture of what can happen when we dare to speak truth to power? Certainly Jeremiah must have felt like there was no hope. His life was as mired down as the mud in which he sank.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like you are "stuck in the mud"? Have you ever felt like the harder you try to do the right thing the more you are kicked in the teeth?

That's how it was for Jeremiah. The Bible tells us that he was called to tear down and pluck up. His message for 40 years was an unrelenting message of judgment.

Can you imagine preaching judgment for 40 years? Last week I decried the fact that I had to turn up the heat and preach about judgment for one Sunday. But, suppose that was all I preached for 40 years?

I suspect that I wouldn't be here. Somebody would have thrown me down a dry well by now too!

THE CALL TO PLUCK AND DESTROY

Fortunately, my call was not the same as Jeremiah's. Instead of preaching truth to power, instead of being the personal pastor for the White House, I have been called to preach each Sunday in the local church.

I like to think of myself as a shepherd instead of prophet. I like to think of myself as one who concentrates on the second part of Jeremiah's message, the part about planting and building up.

You would think that it would be a much safer job. Don't believe it.

The call of Jeremiah teaches us that in order to plant you have to plow under the remainder of last year's crop. In order to build something new you sometimes have to tear down the old and dilapidated. We live in a different time and place, but the message God gave Jeremiah is still relevant to us today. We too are called to embrace a salvation that comes through judgment.

Believe me. I'm like Jeremiah. I don't want to preach this message. I know that God's word, when it is rightly preached and understood, makes everyone mad. And I don't want that. I want everyone happy! I want to manage or minimize conflict. I certainly don't want to create it!

But, I have found that conflict is an inevitable part of life.

Our response is often to deny the obvious. We try to ignore the problems of our personal and public lives. You often hear people say, "I avoid talk about religion and politics. It causes too many problems." And indeed that's true. Today more than ever we see how the blend of religion and politics can be a deadly brew.

A DIFFERENT MESSAGE

At Bible study this past week many of our members were talking about the CNN special, God's Warriors. It was how various Christians, Jews and Muslims interpreted their faith in such a way that it justified military action against their enemies.

This is nothing new. You don't have to read the Old Testament very long before you read passages where the enemies of God's people are totally destroyed ... seemingly with God's blessing. God's role is to fight for His people.

But, Jeremiah had a different message. God was not calling his people to go to war. God was calling His people to accept judgment.

Zedekiah had Jeremiah removed from that deep dark well, and Jeremiah told the king the truth in private. He told King Zedekiah, "Don't fight. Surrender.

Accept the fact that the Babylonian conquest is your punishment. It will go easier with you and your family if you do this.”

But, the king did not listen. The Babylonians killed his family, burned the city and took everyone who was someone into exile in Babylon. Now it looked like the whole nation was at the bottom of the well with Jeremiah. Everyone was stuck in the mud and the light above seemed very dim indeed.

A NEW DAY COMING

Oddly enough it's at this low point that the message of Jeremiah begins to change. He switches from a message of tearing down and plucking up to a message of planting and building. Instead of saying, “See, I told you that you were going to be judged for your evil ways.” Jeremiah said instead, “There will come a new day. There will be a new covenant. God will lead you home.”

Through the courageous message of Jeremiah, the people were given the resources they needed to weather the storm of exile. The exile was a time when God's people re-evaluated what it meant to be God's people. The exile was a time when the way was prepared not only for a trip home to the Promised Land but also the ministry of God's Son, Jesus.

I believe that Jeremiah probably didn't know the full impact of his ministry. His was a ministry of tears and struggle and rejection.

He might not have lived to have seen the building and the planting. He only saw the sadness and destruction. I bet that he wished more than once that he had come up with some more excuses instead of foolishly preaching what he thought God was telling him to preach.

A GOD'S EYE VIEW

But, from our perspective we know that his ministry was effective. The message of the prophet who was so despised and rejected in his time was the message that helped God's people rebuild and understand what it really meant to be God's people after the Exile.

I think that it often happens the same way for us. The ministry that we try to do seems so fruitless at times. We struggle to make a difference only to see it all destroyed by thoughtless, seemingly meaningless conflicts. Did it make any difference what we said and did?

Looking at it from our perspective we might be tempted to say “no”. We might think that the story ends at the bottom of the well in the mud or that vision of the holy city smoldering in ruins. We might think that the story ends with broken dreams. We might think that the hope for a Messiah ends on a lonely cross on a hill.

But, God says what we said (will say) in the special music for today. “Don’t be afraid. God is with you in the storms of life.” The promise he gave Jeremiah is the same promise that he gives us. “I will be with you.”

Notice that God didn’t tell Jeremiah that the seas would always be calm. His life was one big storm. But, God was always with him in the storm. And that made all the difference.

In the long run Jeremiah’s faithful proclamation of God’s word changed everything. It provided the foundation for an even greater salvation. We know that now.

You’ve heard that phrase, “a bird’s eye view”? It means that sometimes we can see more when we’re up higher. There are patterns and insights that can only be seen from a bird’s eye view.

I would suggest that in our lesson for today we have been given a “God’s eye view” of the world. In the story of Jeremiah we see that God’s purpose and plan was worked out through the obedience of a tongue tied youngster.

What looked like a total failure was in reality a total success. We see it now because we are looking back. We see Jeremiah’s life from God’s perspective.

PATIENCE TO WAIT ON GOD

And we should use this insight to gain courage and encouragement when things look bleak in our own lives. Over the years I've counseled with many ministers who have been very discouraged. They've experienced conflict in their churches, and they have left that church thinking that their ministry was a failure.

Actually, I think that they were often wrong in their evaluation. Not only did they have the courage to tear down false hopes and judge expectations that were not in line with the gospel; they also prepared the way for something new to be planted and built up.

If there was any fault on their part, it was that they didn't have the patience to believe that God would work out His purpose through this difficult time in the life of that church and the life of their ministry.

Some of you might be discouraged with your life this morning too. Some of you may even think that you are a failure.

You may think that you have failed as a mother or father or husband or wife. You may think that your job is meaningless and your life is going nowhere. You may think that the best years of your life have passed you by. Maybe, some of you are even like Jeremiah. You think that you're too young and too tongue tied to make a difference.

No matter why you are discouraged; the answer to your problem is the same. The answer to your problem is to look at the world in a different way. You need a higher vision. You need a God's eye view of the world.

Long ago God was able to use a tongue tied youth to proclaim his message; God can use you today. The Bible tells us that God has decided to bring his saving word to the world through inadequate people, people just like you and me.

As Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, "We have this treasure in clay jars (earthen vessels); so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (2 Corinthians 4:7)

To put it another way, “Do you say that you’re weak and inadequate in every way?” That’s great. You’re perfect for the job. You’re just what God wants. You will have to trust God, and it will be apparent that the power came from God and not from your ability to make things happen.

PLANT AN ACORN

We must be willing to accept the fact that we may not see the fruits of our labor. Much of what we do in ministry and in life does not have immediate, short term results. Sometimes the importance of what we do can only be understood from a historical perspective.

Those of you who are teachers understand this well. You pour your life into the education of children. Yet very few of you will get any credit for your efforts.

The children might not even be able to remember your name when they grow up. But, their lives will be changed by what you were able to teach them. In no small measure, the person they become is due to what you taught them at a crucial time. You teach because you have faith in the future.

Someone once said that it takes a lot of faith in the future to plant an acorn. Most people who plant an acorn will never see the mature oak tree that it produces.

And most people who faithfully proclaim God’s word will not understand the full impact of what they have done. But, God knows.

I believe that the purpose and plan of God is woven into the very fabric of lives each and every day. God is working His purpose out in what you do and say this very day.

You can make excuses and say that your life doesn’t matter ... that you are too young, old, tired or busy. But, none of those excuses matter when you realize that the Creator of heaven and earth is the one who calls.

He calls you to proclaim his word. He calls you to plant a seed in the hearts and minds of his people.

Dare to do it. Despite all the evidence to the contrary proclaim the word with courage and hope. Take a God's eye view of the world.

Plant the acorn. One day the world will be astounded by the tree that grows.

Amen.