

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Sermon

Our text today comes from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is one of the major prophets in the Abrahamic faiths. The son of a priest he prophesied through a difficult time in the life of the children of Israel. He was in position for about 40 years and under the reign of several kings. Josiah, the king when Jeremiah was called, had tried to get Israel back on track worshipping God, but it wasn't enough. And through the remainder of the kings under whom Jeremiah served things just got worse. The children were completely taken in by the foreign gods they encountered and forgetting about the God that brought them out of Egypt. As a prophet, it was Jeremiah's job to tell them about themselves.

Next week we start the season of Advent where we begin to anxiously await the coming of our savior. Doing all this Old Testament preaching lately, I can really understand the Advent season this year. So much so that I've decided to deviate from using the Narrative Lectionary to help me plan services through Christmas. I'm switching to the Revised Common Lectionary. See, I'm kinda in a hurry to get into the New Testament and start talking about Jesus. I mean I love the stories in the Old Testament. They are very exciting. But I don't really like the way they present God in the stories. They make the almighty way too human. I might get in trouble for saying this but a lot of times the Old Testament God is a bit of a jerk. I say it because I don't believe what we see in those stories is really God. I think the New Testament depiction of the divine is much closer to the truth... though we mess it up there a bit too.

In any case, the Old Testament is full of stories where God rescues the people from difficulties, they worship for a while, then the people forget about their God and start messing up again. God sends a prophet or two to warn them. The people ignore the prophets and keep on messing up. They get punished, repent and God rescues them. Rinse and repeat.

So I think this is my last week where our focus scripture is in the Old Testament for awhile. I'm ready for me some Jesus. But we aren't there yet. One more Sunday.

What we have today are two bits about Jeremiah. The first is about his calling to be a voice of God to the people. The second is a bit of what he preached. Let's take a quick look.

[Pray with me.]

I love this story about the calling of the prophet Jeremiah. I used to read it when I was a kid and have fantasies of God calling me like that. God speaking directly to

me and calling me out... making me special... giving me some monumental and extremely important task and then equipping me to do it. God sending me out to save the world. That's what this story brought up in me. Not so much because I wanted to be a good Christian. Not because I wanted to serve God in any serious way. I didn't think about what all that meant. No... I wanted to be a hero. I wanted people to read about me several thousand years later and go "Wow!" just like I was doing with Jeremiah's story.

That may sound silly and you're right, it is. I mean when you read Jeremiah's story nobody in their right mind would want his life. They didn't call him the "Weeping Prophet" for nothing. I guess what I connected with in the story is that Jeremiah was a kid when he got called. So that right there was proof that God used kids. And since I was a kid... why couldn't God call me.

Now that I'm older I realize I was more right back than wrong back then. See, I think God actually was calling me... calling us. All of us. Each of us. And we are called to and for a very specific purpose. I think each of us has a role to play in the shaping of this world. Each of us has a part. There's something to which each of us is called and placed on this planet to do.

Now... I'll be the first to tell you that I don't fully know what that means. I get somewhat reluctant to talk like this because I'm not too keen on the whole predestination/unconditional election thing. I'm a bit to Wesleyan for that. But I can't help but to believe that we each have something or some things we are supposed to do. We have each been given a set of gifts and talents that we are to use. Each of us has a job to do. And I believe it is to be done to the glory of God. What does that mean? Glad you asked. I believe doing to the glory of God is doing out of love. Doing to the glory of God is accomplished by loving each other. So then we've been given a set of gifts and talents that we are to use not for ourselves... but for each other. We each have ministry. I know a lot of times when you hear that you think we mean something formal that requires years of training. And there is a form of ministry that requires all that and some of us are called to it. But every one of us has a ministry. Each of us has work to do. Each of us is called to something. I can't stress that enough. It's a part of being the church.

When you accept membership in a faith community... a church... that's what you're signing up for, to be a voice for God in the world.

So yes, you have been called. That's my first point.

What does it feel like to be 'known?' I mean to have somebody really really *know* you? I don't know if that's possible for us. I mean I've seen approximations of it. I've watched my parents who have been together almost 65 years. And since my dad

got back from the Korean War they have not been apart for more than a week or two. They know each other. They finish each other's sentences. They dress alike without even trying to. And it's funny because they bicker all the time. I call them "The Bickersons." Remember that old radio program?

They know each other. They know which buttons to push. And they know how hard to push them. But most of all they know that come hail or high water, they are there for each other. God told Jeremiah that he knew him even before he was conceived. Not only knows who he is but knows what he will become. God knows. God knows his past. God knows his present. And God knows his future.

The Psalmist said, "In you, O Lord, I take refuge." Says, "You are my rock and my fortress." Says, "For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth."

The Psalmist is telling us that just as God knew Jeremiah, God knows us. And God has been protecting us from the moment we took our first breath. God has been with us from the moment our life began. And God can be that refuge of hope because God knows us. See, because God knows us, God can give us exactly what we need to get through our situations. Often we don't even know ourselves what we need. But God knows. And in our times of trouble, if we run to God, God will be our refuge. God will protect us.

I don't know about you but just thinking about that gives me joy. It gives me peace. Because remember, we also have been called to speak God's word to the people. And that can be scary. People don't really want to hear it.

Jeremiah objected to the call. "Not right now," he said. "I'm just a boy." I don't know enough. I don't have enough experience. I don't have the right education. I don't have the right pedigree. I can't right now. I don't have what it takes. Do you recognize those excuses? What are yours? Because we all make them. Perhaps I'm being a bit too judgmental by calling them excuses. Because they are very real. Jeremiah really was just a boy. He really didn't have an extensive vocabulary. He didn't have the experience. But God said that doesn't matter. You don't need to know anything. God said follow me. I'll tell you how to do it. Follow me, I will equip you with all that you need. Follow me and I will give you what to say. Lean on me.

The bible says God touched Jeremiah's mouth. Gave him the words he'd need to say. Jeremiah was called to be a prophet. He needed the words of God. So God equipped Jeremiah for the work that God was calling him to do. And the equipping was just what Jeremiah needed. Nothing extra and nothing light. Just what he needed. And accessible just when he needed it. And God knew exactly what Jeremiah needed because God knows Jeremiah. God knew him from before he

was born. And God was prepared to protect him always. God was his refuge and his hope. You see how this works?

We all have some work to do in this building of the kingdom of God. But we can take comfort knowing that God is with us. Because I'll admit, when you start talking about 'calls' around the church you have good reason to get nervous. That's because it typically means you're about to get into something that's going to be a whole lot of work. It's going to take some time and some energy and is probably going to hurt some. It's going to be frustrating and in some cases might even be dangerous. Look at what it said delivering God's word would do. God told Jeremiah that the message he delivered would uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow. Nobody wants to hear that. Jeremiah got thrown in jail several times in his career as a prophet. And he lived for decades under fear of death. Because he was doing what God called him to do. He was speaking truth to power. He was telling the leaders and the people who followed them that they were heading towards self destruction. He was uprooting their established rules. He was tearing down their established principles. He was destroying their systems and overthrowing their power structures. He was speaking truth. And frankly, most of us can't handle the truth! God said Jeremiah was given authority that supersedes that of the powers that be. In other words it was okay for him to tell them the truth. It was okay for him to speak out against the things they were doing. He could do it because he had the authority granted him by the creator.

I find it interesting that the place God sends Jeremiah to give his message in the part of the story we read today was right to front of the doors to the church. That's right... God sent Jeremiah to set the church folks straight. See, they willingly participated in the systems and institutions that worshiped false Gods. The church got caught up in the money and the power. Too often the church was willing to look the other way when the people in power committed horrible sins. As long as the powers supported the issues that the church deemed most important. And often even those issues were more about control than about justice. And God wants the church to be about justice.

But that's not the worst of it. The real issue is that the church really believes that what they are doing is right. I think they genuinely believe that they are protecting their faith. In their minds they are defending the law. They think they are doing the right thing. Unfortunately they don't understand what this faith thing is all about.

It's a sad story because this all supposedly went down in like 670 BCE but it could be a story pulled right out of today's headlines. We are still doing the same stuff. You watch the news. I don't have to list specific things the people in this whacko world are doing to each other. You should be able to see it clearly. But just in case, let me help you out. God put the words in Jeremiah's mouth for us to hear. What

does God want us to do? deal with each other justly, do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, do not shed innocent blood in this place, do not follow other gods to your own harm In other words, we have to love one another. If I love you I want to see you do well and will treat you justly. If I love you I would never do anything to hold you back. I want to see you be flying free. That's if I love you. You get where I'm going with this? So let me ask you to do something. I want you to look at the top 4 or 5 things we see the church fighting for or against right now. What are the things that the Christian Church in America is known for in the world right now? When you see something about the church on the world news... what is it about? How much of it is about us showing love? And don't be fooled by the acts of charity you see us commit in times of crises. I mean they are great and I don't want to diminish them or devalue those who contribute to them. But why do we need to wait until there is a calamity to act? Isn't that something we should be doing all the time? Or maybe we should be figuring out how to prevent the calamities from happening. Talking about "We're doing God's will. We're doing God's will. We're doing God's will." God told Jeremiah to tell the church, "That is total nonsense! That is not my will. It's good that you come out here from your suburban home to the New Haven Green and hand out sandwiches a couple times a month. But that's not enough. No... my will is that you figure out how to tear down the systems that have our brothers and sisters out there hungry in the first place. That's the kinda stuff I want my church to do. Don't start patting yourself on the back thinking you've done something when you helped somebody one day. What are you doing about the institutions that make them need help?"

I'm going to leave that alone for now. But I believe that is the message that God called the prophet to deliver to the people... starting with the church. And it speaks to what we are called to do in today's world. Because we are doing it again. We are messing up our side of the covenant. We are turning away from our God. Well it is up to us – the church – to warn the world. But first we need to get our own act together. Because just as we are called to tear down, uproot, destroy and overthrow... we are also called to build up and to plant. I know... it's a big job. But it's the job we were called for. It's the job we have to do. I know... it won't be easy. But God is there with you, protecting you and giving you exactly what to say.

I wanted to leave you with something happy today. Send you home singing. But times are too perilous for that. The world needs us to do love. To show love. To BE love. Church are you ready for this mission? I hope so. Because if we fail... we will die.

Amen