

Sermon – Jeremiah 1.4-10

11th Sunday after Pentecost

‘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.’

So said the Lord our God to Jeremiah. Today we begin 6 weeks of working our way through the Old Testament Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. I’ve never preached on Jeremiah before but I thought the messages from today’s reading were on point, so today we’ll learn something about this part of the Old Testament and also reflect on his message, and we’ll see if anyone else picks up the challenge to preach on this fascinating and emotional prophet in coming weeks.

So what do you think of your life, as you have lived it? Most of us in this room, have a few years under our belts. When I think of my life, I think of lots of ups and downs, a great deal of joy in my various pursuits, and also some pain. I’ve experienced relationship break down and a range of health issues. As I reflect on life, I’ve come to believe that a life lived only for the pursuit of pleasure has nothing honourable or admirable about it. In fact, such a life becomes increasingly empty and morally questionable. We only have to look at the celebrity magazines and social media to see examples of this.

In our scripture today, God calls Jeremiah to a life greater than that, a life of purpose and meaning: “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.”

Jeremiah's life was about something bigger than himself, something bigger than his own desires; it was about God's work, and God claimed him even before he was born.

While we are not Jeremiah, the prophet's call story can serve to illuminate our own vocations, our own calls to discipleship. Indeed, Jesus calls us all to follow him. The Old Testament describes the great Creator God and the relationship that God has with the people of Israel. We hear of their journey as they grapple with what it means to be a people of God. In the Book of Jeremiah we hear more about their failures to be a people of God than their successes. God, who knows Jeremiah before he is born, calls him to a life lived for the sake of God's mission in the world. As Eugene Peterson, one of the great American pastoral theologians, puts it:

We are known before we know ... We enter a world we didn't create. We grow into a life already provided for us. We arrive in a complex of relationships with other wills and destinies that are already in full operation before we are introduced. If we are going to live appropriately, we must be aware that we are living in the middle of a story that was begun and will be concluded by another. And this other is God.¹

So what does this story entail for Jeremiah? Like us, Jeremiah lived during a time of political and religious upheaval. His world is dominated by superpowers: the waning Assyrian empire, the emerging Babylonians and the ever present Egyptians. Jeremiah is called to speak an uncomfortable

1. Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Second edition, InterVarsity Press, 2009), 39.

word, a dangerous word, a word that will call his people to account.

Jeremiah is given the vocation “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” It makes me wonder, what needs pruning in our own world? What needs to go, to then be rebuilt?

Throughout the book, judgment and mercy are the two sides of Jeremiah’s message, though judgment seems to be much more prominent in his preaching than mercy. The book is made up of beautiful prophetic poetry spoken by Jeremiah and interspersed with narrative about Jeremiah and the world he lived in during the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedakiah, often written by his scribe Baruch. It’s a long book, 52 chapters, and well worth reading along over the next 6 weeks.

Did you notice that Jeremiah tries to get out of this mission when he says: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” He cannot see beyond the horizon of his own self-limitations. It is a common reaction from those called to be prophets (think of Moses at the burning bush) or those called into ministry — it’s common to feel inadequate and ill-prepared for the complexities of leading a people on their faith journey. Have you ever felt inadequate or ill-prepared for the work before you?

God’s response to Jeremiah’s protest is two-fold: 1) I am with you; and 2) I will give you the words to speak. “‘Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’ 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.’”

Jeremiah is called to a task bigger than himself, but the good news is that it is not his task alone to complete. It is God’s mission, and God will provide

him the words to speak. Even more to the point, God will be with him in the midst of the struggle.

Of course, that doesn't make it any less of a struggle. Jeremiah's message did not endear him to his people. He was put into stocks, thrown into a pit, mocked and derided. Many people called for his execution on charges of treason. Despite being a Levitical priest with family origins going way back to King David's time, he was deeply unpopular. When he passed by in the marketplace, people pointed at him and laughed.

That is why, many years into his ministry, Jeremiah tried to quit. He handed in his notice (Jeremiah 20:9): "I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' but within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot".

And this is where God's call leads: In spite of the trouble he encounters, Jeremiah can't quit. The call of God is so strong upon his life that to deny it is to be consumed by fire from the inside. No matter the cost, he must speak the word that God gives him to speak.

In this lament, Jeremiah speaks of a fearful part of life with God, a part we'd rather not think about — the fact that God's call on our lives may cost us everything that we hold dear. Jesus speaks of the same uncomfortable truth: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

But even at this low point, years into his ministry, Jeremiah realizes the truth of the promise God gave to him right at the beginning of that ministry. God will not abandon him; he is not alone. After Jeremiah calls God out for coercing him into this job, after Jeremiah laments bitterly to this God who

will not let him off the hook, he says this: “The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior” (Jeremiah 20:11). God is with him. *The God who will not let him off the hook is also the God who will not let him go.*

Jeremiah’s call and his subsequent ministry illustrate the risk of discipleship. But they also testify to the joy of such discipleship. Jeremiah’s witness, and that of the saints through the ages, teaches us this: The life that we find when we give up our lives to follow God’s call, is, after all is said and done, the life most worth living. To become the people that God calls us to be, to become disciples of Jesus, is to become really and truly human at last.

We see that witness in Jeremiah’s call and in his ministry, an example of what it means to live a life of purpose and meaning in a world where too many people settle for so much less.

So how do you feel inspired by Jeremiah and his call from God? Are you ready to listen to God? To take up the challenge that God gives you in today’s world? A world that is just as messy and complicated as it was almost 3000 years ago when Jeremiah lived. I think we are fortunate today because we also have Jesus, God who came to earth to live with us in our human form. Jesus who died on the cross for each and every one of us, forgiving our sins, and then by rising to new life, giving us access to God eternally. Each and every day, when I feel that I haven’t got the goods for my God given mission, I pray to Jesus, to be with me, to surround me and to go before me. And God is always there.

Let us pray.

Loving and awesome Creator God,

We give you thanks for your message today about call. That you promise to be with us and to give us the words when we need them. That you pour your Spirit into our hearts, giving us love, peace and grace. We pray that we too can respond with love and conviction. That we can understand how we can make a difference to the lives of people here in Lara and Little River, how we can show the difference you make in our lives to those around us. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the reflection of your glory and the imprint of your very being, Amen.