

People Like Us

Jeremiah: God is Calling

Jeremiah 1:4-10

July 24, 2022

Honestly, you have to feel sorry for Jeremiah. We do not know how old he was; we do know he *thought* he was too young, far too young. Without warning, the word of the Lord comes to him announcing that before he was born, he had been called—set apart—by God as a prophet. His attempt at resistance is futile. Before the chapter ends, he is given a pair of unsettling promises: “The people will fight against you, but they will not prevail.” Not exactly the reassurance he had hoped to hear from God Almighty.

His head still spinning, Jeremiah is sent to speak to the people of Judah. The words he must speak are *not* easy words. Jeremiah expresses divine disappointment and frustration at those who call themselves religious but leave their faith at the doors of the sanctuary. They are self-righteous and ostentatious in worship but fail to live the ethical commands of their scripture and theology. They are moving too quickly down the wrong path. They are going into exile in Babylon.

That’s the message, but for Jeremiah, the context, the audience, is as challenging as the message itself. This prophet must speak those words to his own people. Just a kid, he must speak words of judgment to his aunts and uncles, his cousins and classmates. He is called to predict the absolute destruction of the land that he loves and the exile of his own community. And so, it is little wonder that he resists. Like Moses and Jonah and Isaiah, and maybe even some of us, Jeremiah attempts to reject the call of God, to say, “No, thank you.” Too vague. Too complicated. Too controversial. Too much pressure.

Too hard. Too scary. Not me. Not now.

Jeremiah’s specific objection is that he is too young to speak God’s word. One of my favorite lines ever written is the one that begins Reinhold Niebuhr’s diary, titled *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, which the great theologian Niebuhr wrote when he was a twenty-three-year-old pastor serving his first congregation in Detroit. Niebuhr begins the journal with these words: “There is something ludicrous about a callow young fool like myself standing up to preach a sermon to these good folks. I talk wisely about life but know little of life’s problems. I tell them of the need to sacrifice, although most of them could tell me something about what sacrifice really means.”¹ Niebuhr’s words find a home in my own experience. You might say I resemble those remarks. So does Jeremiah, and he reminds God of this. Literally, Jeremiah says, “God, I am only a kid.”

For his part, Moses objects *five* times to God’s call from the burning bush, using excuses about his lack of oratorical ability and credibility among the people. His final protest is the most desperate and therefore the most direct. Moses simply says, “O God, please send someone else.” I wonder if you have been there. I wonder if you’ve ever asked God to leave you alone, to let you remain unchanged, as you are, to send someone else instead.

Too hard. Too scary. Not me. Not now.

Here’s the thing. When it comes to the call of God, there is no one else. There is no other person who possesses your unique gifts and experiences. There is no one else who fits the puzzle of God’s plan in the place specifically reserved for you. Despite our attempts at resistance, God’s pursuing call is both

patient and persistent. Jeremiah is called to speak. And Jeremiah will speak.

It is not an easy charge. Not long ago, *Psychology Today* conducted a survey of the fears of Americans. The results will not surprise you. As has been consistently true for decades now, fear of public speaking tops the list. It beats out heights, snakes, spiders, zombies, and the dark. It even outranks death, suggesting that if you must attend a funeral, most of us would rather be in the casket than delivering the eulogy. Too hard. Too scary. Not me. Not now.

It's hard to speak, but Jeremiah is called to speak the word of God. For most of us, this only intensifies the anxiety, for we have learned that it is impolite to speak of our faith. Study after study suggests that, particularly among mainline protestant Christians (that's folk like us), there is more than a little ambivalence and a great deal of reluctance when it comes to speaking of our faith in Jesus Christ. What is most striking to me in the data is that this is even true within our own families. If we are not speaking to those whom we love most about the faith we hold, how can we even hope to share that faith with neighbors and strangers? Or as the Apostle Paul asked, "How are they to hear unless someone proclaims? How are they to believe in the God of whom they never hear?" The question is as appropriate today as it was two millennia ago.

Like Jeremiah in his day, we resist the call to speak. And let's be clear: we have good reasons; we have good excuses. We're embarrassed by the voices that dominate the discussion of faith we hear, and we don't want to be associated with them. We defend our reluctance.

It's too hard. Too scary. Not us. Not now.

And here's what happens. Into the vacuum left by our silenced voices, the shouts of pompous self-appointed prophets seize the platform to proclaim hatred and division in the name of the God of love and compassion. All for the purpose of pursuing

power. *For shame*. For shame. Second Church, we must speak our faith. There is no substitute for your unique voice.

Where do we begin? Perhaps here Jeremiah can be a model for us. God pursues the young man before he can even consider his options, call his mother, or read the terms of his divine contract. He is given a vocation that is difficult and trying at every turn. The book of the prophet that follows this chapter will show challenge after crisis. But there is, with the call, a promise. It comes in verse eight. It comes from the voice of God. It is this: "Do not be afraid. I am with you."

That's all. That's it. And that's *everything*. God believes in Jeremiah. That's all the young prophet needs to hear. As one Old Testament scholar has written, "The saving presence of God...renders every perceived inadequacy irrelevant."ⁱⁱ And so, Jeremiah does speak. He speaks words of judgment without apology or any hint of smug satisfaction. He does not distance himself from his own people. He goes with them into exile, and there in Babylon he finds comforting words of God's vision to speak to the people: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans not for harm but for good. To give you a future with hope." Confident in his call, Jeremiah speaks of God.

Friends, we can do the same. Speaking *our* faith does not mean spouting self-righteous platitudes. It does not mean issuing dire warnings or using coercive language to incite the fear of the other. The words we choose to speak matter. The way we deliver the message matters as well. I commend testimony. Tell about how being part of a community of faith has deepened your walk with God. Describe the sacred gift of worship, the comfort of prayer, the power of scripture, the holy space of gathered silence. Give testimony to the impact your faith has made in how you see the world. Contradict pervasive voices of polarized pontification with simple statements of compassion for the outsider and inclusive love for all God's children. Speak your faith.

All summer I've been thinking about the unique voice of the Church—and of this church—in the moment we're living. Here's what I've concluded. At Second Church, we are called to speak of God. Now, that may seem obvious. I hear you. (*I got up early on a Sunday morning for that?!*) But I actually think it's radical. You see, there are more than enough voices out there eager to tell you what God thinks, or to use faith for the purpose of promoting a pre-formed agenda, or to employ faith as a weapon to pulverize perceived opponents.

But what if we spoke not *as* God, but *of* God? What if we brought reverence to the table of public discourse? What if we told our story of encounter with God and how we have been shaped by it? What if we spoke not *as* God, but *of* God? Not to condemn another or promote ourselves, but to say with gentleness and conviction what it is that we believe. That in Jesus Christ, the word of the Lord has come to be one with us, to give us lives of meaning and purpose. That we are called to love and to give ourselves away for the sake of one another. What if we spoke not *as* God, but *of* God?

When I think of Jeremiah or Reinhold Niebuhr, I remember this description of a prophet from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*: "How do you tell a prophet from a scribe? Prophets *love* the people they chastise."

It is love that animates Jeremiah's prophetic words. And so, if we are to speak of God, we *must* begin with love. Love for God. Love for one another. Love for neighbors. Love for strangers. Love, even for our enemies. For I am absolutely persuaded that *only* a ministry rooted in and defined by love can respond to the call of God in this moment. If we fail to love, we have failed.

This year, we at Second Church are called to speak the truth *in love*.

Too hard. Too scary. Not us. Not now. Please, God, send someone else.

No. There is no one else. There is no other institution, no other collection of individuals, no other organization, that is uniquely called to speak of God. That is the Church's responsibility. To love those to whom we speak. To tell the truth with courage and with grace. To speak of God. We were created for this.

And so, like Jeremiah, God calls us to do some hard and scary things—to use our voice to share our testimony. I've been in ministry with you all for four years now. I've tried to listen and learn. And I may still be callow and foolish, but I'm not as young as I was. After all, these four years have not been business as usual. We've seen the soaring best and the depraved worst of what humankind can be. We have felt the strain of division and the galvanizing power of unity. We have grieved for unthinkable loss, and we have celebrated unexpected growth. We have plunged into our community, and there we have discovered profound need. We've turned our vision toward the city where God has placed us and the future to which God calls us. In these four years, I've heard your testimonies and your deepest hopes for this place, the voice of the Spirit whispering in your ear and guiding your walk of faith.

Testimonies to a faith that reaches out and looks forward. Testimonies to a faith that challenges complacency and unsettles the comfortable.

Hopes for a church whose doors and hearts are open wide enough for every child of God to find a place to belong and a voice to raise.

Hopes for a congregation not obsessed with rigid uniformity but intentionally building bridges across the cacophony of chasms and conflict. A place where redemptive dialogue seeks a better path.

Hopes for a community willing to take a risk for the sake of love, eager to be faithful witnesses of the God who uses people like us.

It is the witness of a church that speaks not as God, but is unafraid to speak *of* God.

This week, I met with a friend and member of our congregation. He leads an extraordinary program dedicated to connecting trained companions with patients who need extra support and care after being discharged from the hospital. You may know that Second Church is an active partner in this program, the Congregational Care Network, that we have joined with our siblings at Eastern Star to form an alliance dedicated to caring for those who need that extra support when they are discharged. As Shadreck shared with me his passion for the work to which he is called, he spoke of his faith. He spoke unapologetically of God. God who seeks out the lost and the hurting. God who calls us to serve, to listen, to care, to love. The God who is with us. The God whose presence renders every perceived inadequacy irrelevant.

Yes, the God who believes in us. The God who calls us to speak. Amen.

ⁱ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, New York: Harper and Row, 1956. p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Portier-Young, Anatheia, *Commentary on Jeremiah 1:4-10*, 2010.