

Their Story, Our Story: Courage Amidst Crisis (Jeremiah)

Romans 12:9-18 Jeremiah 1:4-10

This spring and first part of summer we're looking at a few of the characters in the Bible who God called to play a role, some part, in the great Story of redemption and renewal. The goal in this series is to find our story in their story. Or in at least one of their stories. We are not all going to find our story in all of their stories. But we can, and will, find some touchpoints from each story that we can relate to, or learn from. And, along the way we will likely find ourselves in at least one of these character's stories in a more profound way.

Most of these are unlikely people—ones we wouldn't expect to be called—but they turn out to be the ones who are brave, savvy, and they know how to get stuff done!

Last week, we began with Abraham, who was blessed to be a blessing, and was called to exercise great trust and set out, and move to a place where God would lead him, "not knowing where he was going" as the author to Hebrews put it, to become the father of a new nation. We, likewise, are blessed to be a blessing.

This morning we're looking at the prophet Jeremiah. Of all of the prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah is the most transparent about his life. We know

some things about the other prophets' lives from their writings, but Jeremiah opens himself up, frequently, to express his reactions and responses to God, to his calling, and his life. He is very transparent! So, in many ways the book of Jeremiah is in the Bible, not only because of his proclamations, but also because of his life and how he lived in light of God's calling, and in light of the great difficulties he faced—because of that calling!

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
'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.'
Then I said, 'Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I
am only a boy.' 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.
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.
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.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Before we dive in and talk about Jeremiah's calling, a note about the prophets in general. The prophets are like... alarm clocks!

They are like alarm clocks, to wake people up from sleepwalking through life and faith. And alarm clocks can be startling! Especially when we would rather sleep in. Which is why the prophets weren't very popular people.

The other thing about prophets is that they didn't just speak out against individual sins but also against systemic and corporate wrongdoing and injustice. Especially if God's name was invoked to justify things like systemic greed, and so forth. Nobody likes to be confronted about those things, whether individuals or corporate entities, and so the prophets had difficult jobs, if you will, because of what God called them to say and do. Jeremiah's was particularly difficult.

As an important part of the history and context here, it needs to be pointed out that Jeremiah was called by God at a time (in the 7th century BC.) when Israel, as a nation, was beginning to crumble from within—morally and spiritually. Just two centuries earlier Israel was the dominant empire in the region under King David. Those were their glory years. But Israel became proud, affluent, corrupt, and spiritually complacent, and Jeremiah was God's chosen prophet to speak to the people at that time about their complacency and corruption. Not only about individual and corporate sin and corruption, but about the doom that was coming

in the not-too-distant future—that is, the invasion of their land by the Babylonians, who were growing in power and collaborating with other nations to take over the region. And indeed, Jerusalem was eventually invaded by the Babylonians and a large portion of the population was sent into exile. Jeremiah was the main prophet during the Babylonian exile. And, of course, leading up to it.

So, Jeremiah had a tough job, of speaking truth about the current condition, and of telling the people to be prepared for what was coming (wake up!). From the very beginning, Jeremiah's life will be hard, God tells him. In fact, God says to Jeremiah (7:27), "You shall speak my words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you."

"Oh great," you can hear Jeremiah saying. "That sounds... fun/not fun!?" Jeremiah didn't sign up for this. Who would?? "I think I'd like to find a vocation where I'm supposed to tell people bad news, then have them ignore me or reject me, then have them persecute me and make my life miserable." No one signs up for that.

But Jeremiah receives this call from God, like so many of the other people in Scripture, and it gets into his bones. At one point, after a particularly humiliating and painful experience at the hands of a priest, of all people, who hated

Jeremiah's truth-telling so much that he put him in stocks in the public square in Jerusalem so people who walked by could throw things at him, slap or punch him if they wanted, and verbally abuse him... after that, Jeremiah really lets God have it. Yet, at one point during his lament he says this (20:8-9):

*For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, "Violence and destruction are coming!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
But... if I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more 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.*

Here is my interpretation of these two verses: "I hate my job. I can't help but do my job." His calling got into his bones. Jeremiah didn't just receive a task list that he was told to go perform. He became, as a friend of mine calls it, a God-haunted person. God, and his calling from God, got into his flesh and bones, and that

calling kept working itself out in his life, in spite of how much suffering he endured.

His life and calling became so intertwined with God's life, that Jeremiah became known as the weeping prophet. He weeps over the condition of his nation, his people. The prophets are often thought of as pronouncing judgment and wrath, "repent!" and all that, and there is some of that in the prophets, but mainly the prophets reflected God's heart of love for his people, which was sometimes a broken heart. Here is a good example of Jeremiah the weeping prophet from chapter 8:

²¹For the hurt of my people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. ²²Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my people not been restored?

9:1 O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the condition of my poor people!

So, the prophets aren't just proclaiming judgment. They are consistently and passionately calling God's people back to faithfulness, reflecting God's heart, God's love, for the people. And as Jeremiah carried this message to the people, in various ways, he would often weep. And he was ridiculed for it. Because nobody

seems to respect a leader who cries. But Jeremiah felt what God felt; his tears were God's tears, because God's calling was in his flesh and bones.

I wonder if any of you have felt, or feel, that way about something. Some sense of calling, or a concern that has gotten into your bones. Something you feel so passionately about, that it can make you weep; you feel God's energies flowing through you. Jeremiah is a gift to us in that he normalizes this experience. And many of God's servants throughout history have experienced this, and normalize it for us.

I remember a retired man at a church I served years ago, a tough guy who had been a contractor, who volunteered for an after-school tutoring program that served kids from the local elementary school who were disadvantaged in some way. He said he would sometimes have to excuse himself and go into a bathroom and just cry, because some of these kids would talk about the unsafe home environment they came from, or the struggles they and their family were facing just to make ends meet. He heard stories about one of the parents being in prison, or who was a drug addict, or an older sibling had to drop out of school to take a full-time job to support the family. And he would weep over these kids and their families, *and* over a society where these kinds of situations existed. But he loved what he was doing. He had retired from a *job*, but he found a real *calling* in

supporting kids in their education. And, it occasionally made him weep. This tough guy found his heart, he said, but what he really discovered was God's heart, working through him. Like Jeremiah.

I'd like to point out two other things, briefly, about Jeremiah's call that are instructive for us: his response to God's call; and, his stage of life when God called him.

Like almost all of the people God called to serve and speak, as recorded in the Bible, Jeremiah's reflexive response was to resist it. He said, "I can't speak, I'm just a kid." We hear responses similar to this with others, like Moses, who says, "I'm a nobody and I stutter;" like Abraham who says, "I'm too old;" like Isaiah and Peter who both say, "I'm a sinful person." Soon we're going to look at Ruth, who is a foreigner, and Esther, who also feels like she's a nobody. And on it goes.

Like these others, and like us, Jeremiah's problem is that he filters this call through himself. He projects his perceived limitations onto God's calling. And, clearly, he is afraid.

It's one thing to be realistic about our gifts and abilities and have a sense of what we can and can't do, and can or can't handle; it's another thing to simply object to God's call with excuses. Because that objection is a way of limiting God, and what God can do, and through whom God can work. As if God is calling

because of a person's superb qualifications, or that God has some standard of perfection to measure up to. Far from it.

No one in the Bible, not one person, was completely qualified and fully equipped to do what God asked. God isn't telling Jeremiah that he's the best thing since sliced bread. God is saying, "I'm calling you because I'm calling you. And because I have things I want to say and do through you."

Now, God probably did see something in Jeremiah, not in terms of his qualifications, but in terms of his heart, and that he would be faithful to the call that God placed upon him, in spite of how hard it would be.

But Jeremiah objects, and as always, God has a good response to Jeremiah's objections. God is well-prepared to handle our excuses. God always has a good response. And God's responses are always gracious responses, you'll notice.

God's response to Jeremiah is: "Do not be afraid of the people, for I am with you." Then God provides a symbolic gesture. Jeremiah said that God "put out his hand and touched my mouth." Somehow God appeared to Jeremiah in an embodied way, to assure him, tangibly, that this calling was legit, and that Jeremiah would be equipped as needed. Like God did with Moses and his staff, like Jesus did with Peter and the miraculous catch of fish. There is always some tangible confirmation of their call.

God never calls people and tells them to buck up, or leaves them to fend for themselves—"just go and do what I told you to do." God *always* reassures the ones he calls, and equips them with what they need, when they need it. And what everyone needs, most of all, is the assurance of God's presence with them, which helps them serve with confidence, because that assurance alleviates our fears. "I will be with you" is a promise we hear over and over and over again.

Related to Jeremiah's objection, second, is to note his stage of life: he's young. He objects to God's call by saying, "I'm too young." I'm only a boy. I'm just a kid. Youngens like me aren't called to be prophets. And again, God responds with an assurance: "Don't say you're too young; you're just who I need, and want, to do what I'm asking you to do.

It isn't clear exactly how old Jeremiah is, but scholars agree that the word boy, or youth, here, is a word that was used to describe a teenager, around age 16 or 17. That's quite remarkable when we think about it.

When God needed/wanted a prophet to speak truth to a nation that was at the same time full of itself *and* was declining as an imperial power, God called a teenager. Not a mid-career priest (like Isaiah was), or a politician, or a seasoned veteran of the trenches of social reform. But a pimple-faced kid.

And btw, the king at that time of Jeremiah's calling was a young man named Josiah. Josiah came to the throne at age 8, which was about the time that Jeremiah was born. When Josiah was 16 we are told that "He began to seek the God of his father David" and at age 20 he began to initiate reforms in the Jewish religion to create a more just system, and at age 26 he began to rebuild the temple which had fallen into disrepair. This was about one year after Jeremiah began his work as prophet.

So, the leadership movement of Israel at this time was a youth movement! Even though the nation was beginning to crumble, they had dedicated, faithful leadership. Of a 25 year old king, and a 16-17 year old prophet. Who were trying to get their house in order.

It's remarkable. Or maybe not so remarkable... think of youth in recent times who felt a calling and have spoken up, and have engaged in important work. Like Greta Thunberg, an influential young climate activist. Think of the Parkland youth from Margory Stone Douglas High school who took on the NRA following a mass shooting that killed 14 of their classmates. Think of the group of youth ages 5-22 who successfully sued the state of Montana for failing to uphold their state's constitutional requirement, "to maintain and improve a clean and healthful environment." Because these kids, along with vulnerable elderly, were

experiencing poor health effects from increased wildfires, drought, and emissions that weren't being regulated. They basically said to the state, "You said you would do this and you're not. You haven't kept your word." That sounds like the prophets to me!

And there were other youth in the Bible who God called to serve, like young Samuel, like Mary the mother of our Lord. And like Timothy. God assured them, told them not to be afraid, and that their words and actions, their faithfulness, was needed.

I love Paul's words to young Timothy: don't let anyone despise your youth. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young. Rather, set an example! Be respectful, and... be bold! By remember your calling. So that you can be confident.

The point: God called, and continues to call, all kinds of people to serve in some way: men and women, younger and older, people on the margins and people in the mainstream, people from within the Jewish fold, people from outside the fold, as we will see.

Because of this diversity, it's important that we honor each other. That we listen to each other, and that we listen to what God may be saying through each

other. Because, God calls all kinds of people—people like us!—to heed God’s call to serve.

Hymn: Lord, When I Came into This Life