

"A VULNERABLE PROPHET"

Jeremiah 1:1-10

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York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

If you were trying to convince someone to answer the call of God, I don't think you would use the prophet Jeremiah as an example. He isn't exactly the most happy-go-lucky guy in the Bible. Known as one of the greatest of God's prophets, Jeremiah had a rough life. Here is one writer's description. *Jeremiah's troubled life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., followed by the exile in Babylon. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of it, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering and striving, writing and believing.*

He lived through crushing storms of hostility and furies of bitter doubt. Every muscle in his body was stretched to the limit by fatigue; every thought in his mind was subjected to questioning; every feeling in his heart was put through fires of ridicule. He experienced it all agonizingly and wrote it all magnificently." (1)

How is that for a recruiting poster? Jeremiah was called by God to speak a prophetic word in a time when the people had all but forgotten about God. And that's why they needed a prophet. The people of Judah had turned their backs on God, ignored the covenant that had carried their ancestors through the hard times, and disobeyed God's law. They were unfaithful to God, worshiping idols and false gods. They lost their compassion and no longer cared for the poor. Truth was replaced by corruption and greed. The people once treasured by God, now exhaust God's patience. It is time for things to change. And that's where Jeremiah comes in.

His call in chapter one makes it very clear that God knows Jeremiah better than he even knows himself. When Jeremiah says, "I can't." God says, "Of course you can." When Jeremiah tries to use his age as an excuse, "I am just a kid." God says, "No excuses." Jeremiah is created, known, loved, and called by God. He finally says, "Yes."

From the beginning this prophet knows that his call is designed for conflict. Look at the language God uses in the call. *"I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow."* You can't say God

wasn't honest with Jeremiah. In verse 19 we read, "*They will fight against you but will not prevail.*"

I'm surprised that Jeremiah didn't run in the opposite direction. Of course, some prophets tried that too and it didn't work out so well for them. God wants what God wants. It is pretty clear that this prophet's message will not be readily received- but whose is? The people never want to hear what they have to say, especially when they are criticizing what the people are or aren't doing. Jeremiah's life and ministry will be shaped by this conflict. But before we call him the prophet of gloom and doom, read the rest of verse 10, God also calls him "*to build and to plant.*"

Yes, Jeremiah speaks harsh judgment and inescapable destruction, but he, like most of God's prophets, also articulates passionate hope. He carries the promises of God in his heart and trusts in those promises when all else seems lost. The people have made a mess of things and now it is up to Jeremiah to help steer them in the right direction- back to their God.

The historical reality in which Jeremiah lived and worked was the rise and expansion of the Babylonian empire. An empire that would destroy the holy city of Jerusalem, reduce the sacred temple to rubble and cart off the best and the brightest citizens to a life in exile. The prophet's task was to help his community face the loss of the old world and receive the new world defined by God. The problem is that they like the old world, they don't want a new one- and they especially don't want **this** one. Who would? Their new life is exile in enemy territory. They refuse to see their own complicity in this impending disaster. And they refuse to see the hand of God in this crisis so they turn against the prophet. Jeremiah was beaten, arrested, thrown in prison, and threatened with death. But he continued to speak God's word to God's obstinate people.

How could Jeremiah continue his ministry in the face of such opposition and danger? I know pastors who are tempted to walk away from much less dangerous situations. Old Testament theologian (and prophet) Walter Brueggemann suggests several reasons for Jeremiah's faithfulness to his call. First, the prophet had a robust view of God. His relationship with God was vital, alive, real. He has the freedom to disagree with God, even to blame God for his troubles, and he knows that God is still with him. Jeremiah prays some of the most eloquent and abrasive prayers in scripture. There is a give and take in his dialogue with God. He displays a deep and profound trust in the Creator that carries him through all of his trials.

Second, Jeremiah has a view of the larger picture- he can see the political and social realities of his time. He genuinely loves and cares for his community. He

cares enough to speak a dangerous truth. He wants the people to be prepared for what is to come. And even though they brought it on themselves, his heart breaks for them.

Third, Jeremiah has a vigorous sense of his own call. He realizes that this call is not a one-time event, but is an ongoing relationship; it is a growing, evolving, powerful claim. His sense of call, like ours, matures over time. He knew that he wasn't doing this by his own power, but in service to the God who created him and loves him.

The fourth reason is not an easy one, because his call enveloped him in conflict, Jeremiah knew he was at risk. He was in conflict with everyone- kings, prophets, the people, even God. But he understood that the conflict was part of God's design so he could live with it without being destroyed by it.

And finally, above all, Jeremiah is a poet of hope. His call included "to plant and to build" and he believed that God would do a new thing through this time of pain and crisis. He knew that loss, destruction, and death did not have the last word- God has the last word and that word is **life**. In chapter 29 we read these words, *"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me."* (2)

Jeremiah wants the people to know that there is still time for repentance, still time for healing. Even in the face of this insurmountable tragedy, even in the midst of exile, there is still time for transformation of their hearts. They can still turn back to God and seek forgiveness. God wants to heal the brokenness but the people seem to be oblivious.

Throughout his ministry, Jeremiah himself had to struggle with the mighty power of God's word, but he could not refrain from speaking it. He knew it would get him into trouble, he knew it was risky, he knew it would put him in danger, he knew even his friends would turn against him. But still he knew he had to speak. The purpose of his life was to be a prophet to the nations. He could not have done it on his own. His strength and courage came from the power of the One who sent him, the One who spoke through him.

False prophets flourished in that time by preaching a comfortable message of peace when there was no peace; by promising that the good old days would soon return. They were quite popular with the people because they spoke a message the people wanted to hear; messages with no cost, no condemnation, no responsibility.

In the long run, though, the biggest impression was made by the true prophets, like Jeremiah, whose sharp words punctured their illusions and forced them to face reality.

Some might see Jeremiah's career as a failure. After all, for forty years he had hammered away at a single message from God: the nation would be destroyed and everything the people held dear would be gone. Not exactly the way to win friends and influence people. He always held out hope for restoration. But the horrible catastrophe unfolded right before his eyes because the people had refused to listen. Jeremiah himself had fallen into despair more than once, not only at the rejection and ridicule heaped upon him, but simply under the grinding weight of the message he carried. Yet even in this most difficult of times the prophet never lost sight of that message, or his source of strength in God. He experienced the empowerment of God even in the most adverse circumstances imaginable.

Jeremiah knew that when human beings are insufficient, God is sufficient. Years after Jeremiah prophesied, his message was finally vindicated. His writings became the foundation for understanding the new covenant after the exile. His ministry laid the foundation for a new definition of what it meant to be God's people.

The words of this prophet remind us that God's actions in the world do not end with plucking up and overthrowing, but in building and planting. Jeremiah never lost sight of the truth that God's purpose was not merely to destroy- he knew the ground had to be swept clean of false and shaky foundations so that God might build and plant anew. Jeremiah had hope because he knew that God would renew the covenant with the people.

Jeremiah's call was to be faithful to the word of God that he had received. He was not called to be successful; he was only called to speak the word. We too are called to simply live and be faithful to the word we have received from God; trusting that God will take our inadequacy and use it in ways that we have not dreamed or could have imagined.

I doubt that any of us would like to live the life of Jeremiah, but we too are created, known, loved, and called by God. We are called to make a difference in the world in which we live. Maybe you are called to serve God right where we are. Maybe you are called to pack your bags and embark on a new adventure in another place.

One thing you can be sure of: God does and will call you. God knew you before you were born. God knows your strengths and your weaknesses. God knows more about you than you will ever know.

Like Jeremiah, we are called to be faithful.

Like Jeremiah, may we have the courage to say "YES" to God's call, wherever it may lead.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *THE MESSAGE, Introduction to the book of Jeremiah, Eugene Peterson. NavPress. 2002. Pg. 1342.*
- *HOPEFUL IMAGINATION: PROIPHETIC VOICES IN EXILE, Walter Brueggemann, Fortress Press. 1986. Pp. 14-20.*