

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 13:10-17

11th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 25, 2019

Jeremiah's Call and Commission

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

God's transforming power is evident in our Old Testament Lesson for today. God calls a person who is still dependent upon parental support, having not yet reached adulthood. God calls young Jeremiah to proclaim God's word to a people who were in no mood to listen. But God promises to be with him. Listen to these words from Jeremiah 1:4-10...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Like Jeremiah, Jesus will experience opposition to the message that God has given him to proclaim. Jesus heals a disabled woman on the Sabbath and the healing brings about indignation in the ruler of the synagogue. But the people rejoice at the glorious things he is doing. Listen to these words from Luke 13:10-17...

Sermon

There's an old line that pundits like to pull out each year that there is a presidential election: "Anyone who desires to be president should be disqualified out of hand. They obviously need to be placed in an institution...." By this reasoning, one's reluctance to accept the job—one who would refuse the nomination should it come—is seen as the true hero, the sound of mind.

In Arthur C. Clarke's novel *Imperial Earth*, the future leaders of the planet are chosen by computers from a select list of qualified candidates, rather than anything like popular elections. The reason? No one perceptive enough to do the job well is ever going to want it, for he or she

will realize the hardships and sacrifice it is going to impose. Those who are chosen work especially hard to excel, knowing this is the only way to win early release from their responsibilities.

Well, the Hebrew Scriptures often present an initial and even ongoing reluctance to embrace the call of God. For false prophets often speak too glibly and eagerly in the name of the Lord. They like to proclaim the pleasing and popular word, the immediately peaceful word, the unfounded and inordinately optimistic word. Not so Jeremiah.

In expressing such reluctance to God's call Jeremiah is joined in Scripture by the likes of Moses, Gideon, Saul, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. There at the burning bush God told Moses that he was sending him to Pharaoh so that Moses could lead God's people out of bondage. But Moses said to God:

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? (Exodus 3:11)

In fact four times Moses attempts to deflect God's claim on his future life and work. In the fourth attempt Moses declares:

O, my Lord, I have never been eloquent...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. (Exodus 4:10)

God's reply is that he will be the mouth for Moses and teach him what he is to speak.

And then in the year that King Azziah died, when God called Isaiah to be his messenger to the rebellious people of Israel, Isaiah protested:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. (Isaiah 6:5)

How will he be able to speak a purging word? Only as God applies hot coals from the high altar to his lips.

Protests of inadequacy, whether real or imagined, serve to reinforce a basic biblical and theological truth: the actual work of transformation is brought about by God alone. Such redemption—often beginning with the individual, but extending to the situation or nation—is a result of God’s word—not any virtue of the prophet.

Here in verse 5 of our Old Testament lesson this morning we find God’s call to Jeremiah to be a prophet, not just to Israel, but to the nations.

“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.”

And in verse 6 Jeremiah replies

Ah, Lord God! I do not know how to speak, for I am but a boy.

God is not convinced.

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. (1:7-8)

The Apostle Paul believed himself to have been “set apart from birth.” In Galatians 1 he says:

God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through
his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me. (1:15-16a)

In this 5th verse of Jeremiah 1 we have an affirmation of God’s omniscience—his all-knowing character. The Psalmist said:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely. (139:1-4)

The declaration of God's knowing us before birth serves to affirm the human dignity and worth of every person. In a world of convenient abortions, child neglect and abuse, where life is often cheap, where innocent people are shot, this text speaks of a different reality—that the Creator places value on each individual human life, *even before that life is formed in the womb*.

The text goes on to report the prophet's understanding of his call and commission. Jeremiah was appointed to be a prophet to the nations. Now I believe that God has a purpose for each of us. In the church we recognize God's call and setting apart of pastors, ruling elders, and teachers. People find here in Jeremiah language that resonates with the thought of the Spirit's bringing them to a certain task: "Pastor, I just knew I was supposed to be going on that mission trip." Or, "I had the strange but deepest feeling that I needed to call and check up on that neighbor."

Jeremiah, heard God's call, but didn't feel up to the task. God had a different idea and wouldn't take no for an answer. To be sure, many preachers and congregations are daunted by a sense of inadequacy for divine service. And many of us can see this text as a mirror of our own experience. Who am I to be called by God? I am only a boy. But as someone said, "God does not call the equipped; he equips the called." Well, God assured Jeremiah that He who was calling would enable and sustain. And just so, God can do wonderful things through Midway Presbyterian Church.

Today the Officer Nominating Committee begins its assignment of identifying members of the congregation who are willing and able to serve as an Elder. If you are asked, I hope you will trust that with God's help you can do the job. Beyond that, God calls each one of us, not just to come and worship, but to go and serve.

By answering God’s call young, inexperienced Jeremiah would provide a message of hope against a background of political, military, and religious disaster and the enormous human suffering that accompanied it. The clock could not be turned back to avoid what had so tragically taken place. Due to the sins of the people, there is destruction by the Babylonian army and the people are in captivity. But men and women whose lives had been overtaken by these events *could* be assisted in facing them, responding courageously to them, and looking in hope beyond them. That was the role of Jeremiah. That was his commission from God.

Now Jeremiah was far from being merely a “weeping prophet.” He did on occasion weep and lament, sometimes for himself, but more often—like Jesus—for the people around him. He once said:

For the wound of my people my heart is wounded (8:21)

The final thing to note here is in verse 10, where God says,

“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.”

Such is the two-fold nature of Jeremiah’s call to be a prophet to the nations. Namely, in proclaiming a word that breaks, *and* a word that builds. A word of judgment *and* a word of hope. So the word that God sends into the world through Jeremiah is first a disruptive word. God is not like a heavenly grandfather who would just pat the self-interested on the back, and send them on their way. Right worship matters. Right treatment of the poor and the stranger and the sick matters. The woman in Luke 13—crippled for 18 years—can be healed, *on the Sabbath*. God will not simply turn a blind eye to indifference and intolerance, self-absorption and self-deception. But predominately Jeremiah’s book contains a message of hope: “to build and to plant,” to restore.

Jeremiah's work as a prophet is thus inaugurated. He will suffer greatly in the coming years, and the nation will suffer even more. Yet, out of their suffering will emerge a new day in the life of the Jewish people and in the life of humankind. Only a boy, Jeremiah's faithful response to the call of God played a significant role in that rebirth. Likewise, through our faithful response to God's call, he can do far more than we can ask or think.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.