

Jeremiah 1 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (4-10, 14-19)

Jeremiah's Call and Commission

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵"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."

⁶Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷But 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.

⁸Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD."

⁹Then 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.

¹⁰See, 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."

¹⁴Then the LORD said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁵For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the LORD; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. ¹⁶And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. ¹⁷But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. ¹⁸And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. ¹⁹They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.

Jeremiah 2: God Pleads with Israel to Repent (4-13)

⁴Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the Lord:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

⁶They did not say, "Where is the Lord
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through,
where no one lives?"

⁷I brought you into a plentiful land
to eat its fruits and its good things.
But when you entered you defiled my land,
and made my heritage an abomination.

⁸The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?"
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers^[a] transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and went after things that do not profit.

⁹Therefore once more I accuse you,
says the Lord,
and I accuse your children's children.

¹⁰Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.

¹¹Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.

¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
says the Lord,

¹³for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.

September 1, 2019

Jeremiah 1 & 2

“The Taste of God’s Words”

Kerra Becker English

I’ll begin this sermon the same way Biblical Scholar Kathleen O’Connor began her introduction to the book of Jeremiah in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*. She said, “The prophetic book of Jeremiah sears the soul, challenges the conscience, and promises hope to the wounded in body and spirit.” This is not an easy text – either in content or in presentation. Therefore, it may be one we would be perfectly content to gloss over, especially when times are easy, and our situation comfortable. Given the historical context of this book when Babylon and Egypt are vying for power over Judah and other Israelite territories, the prophetic language in Jeremiah is constantly dealing with themes of survival. How do we survive national turmoil, through the destruction of the world as we have known it to be? How do we survive betrayal from those we want to trust? How do we survive economic hardship with the loss of both land and prosperity? How will we cope with political upheaval and religious pandering to the powerful? Jeremiah is tasked with speaking *God’s Word* into these impossible questions that have no fool-proof answers.

We already know a lot of the human words and platitudes, don’t we? We are familiar with the denial of unpleasant circumstances. If I don’t personally see an impact on my own life, I don’t have to believe that anyone else is feeling an economic pinch or suffering from a lack of job opportunities. I don’t have to acknowledge the bigotry that I don’t see or experience. We are also familiar with the cries to go back to the way things “used to be.” If only we could go back to how things were in whatever decade made us the most comfortable. And we are familiar with the

kind of “sky is falling” Chicken Little comments that want us to believe the world is already at its end, and there’s no way forward. Doomsday prophets on both the right and on the left are happy to tell you the apocalypse is at hand. Today’s news stories are filled with human words that are of little comfort to us as we see our own world changing right before our eyes, and it only seems to be coming at a faster and faster pace. We may or may not be at a point yet of questioning how we are going to survive, but I dare say we have a LOT of questions about how to cope in an ever-shifting world – whether that’s on a national or a personal level.

Enter Jeremiah. Jeremiah was chosen and consecrated before he was born, appointed to be a prophet to the nations in a time of terrible unrest. And one of the “tell” marks of a prophet in scripture is to note how quickly they try to get out of it. No one in their right mind, when God is choosing prophets, goes, “*Pick me, pick me.*” Rather Jeremiah tries to get out of it by saying he’s too young. Others will say they are too old, or can’t speak eloquently. Esther is sure she won’t be heard as a Jewish woman in a Persian court. And Saul, the most infamous persecutor of the anomaly known as the Jesus followers, how will he be able to convince anyone to listen to him tell the stories of Jesus without a dramatic turn on the Damascus Road? So, when God chooses, it isn’t typically the “most likely to succeed” that gets picked. That’s a helpful reminder for today too, that when someone claims to speak for God or be God’s chosen, note whether or not they are eager to claim that recognition. Though there are multiple biblical reminders that God will judge the actions of the powerful, working in and through nations and their leaders, the meager voice – the one who has to be convinced of his or her role – might actually be the one who has heard God’s message with the greatest clarity. If she or he has everything to lose, and absolutely nothing to gain by speaking the truth to power – you just may have a prophet in your midst.

Here's why. We, as human beings, don't really want to hear the voice of God ringing in our ears. It was clear to Jeremiah from the beginning that he didn't want this job. Jeremiah gets appointed OVER nations and kingdoms, and nations and kingdoms ALWAYS like to think that they are the top of the pyramid. And the message coming through Jeremiah is clear – God is going to pull down, pluck up, destroy and overthrow BEFORE there will be times of building and planting. This is both a promise and a threat. The words of God that are put into Jeremiah's mouth are bitter, salty, certainly unpleasant to say and definitely unpleasant to hear. He has to tell the leaders of Judah and the dignitaries of Jerusalem that they are about to be punished for turning away from God. Harkening back to the covenant made in Deuteronomy as Moses brokered the deal between God and God's resistant people, the promise of land was made in exchange for the promise of obedience. But now the people have turned to other gods and worshiped idols made by their own hands. God has had enough, and needs a mouthpiece, again, to deliver a holy message. God at least knows how difficult it could become for Jeremiah, because Jeremiah gets an even further push from the Divine, "Don't break down before them, or I will break you down." Now, God does promise protection, that Jeremiah would be like a fortified city, an iron pillar, a bronze wall, but he lets him know there will be hell to pay if he refuses to take God's Word to the people.

THIS is a powerful call story. I say this as someone who has spent time in personal reflection on what it means to be "called by God." In many ways, we all are. It's not exclusive to biblical prophets or Presbyterian pastors, but the ways in which we hear and answer the summons of God can be profound and life-altering. So far, I haven't felt as though I have been asked to speak God's Word directly, but I have been called to study what it means to be an interpreter of scripture, and I have been called to walk alongside of those who wish to live into a

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relationship with God who is, especially as we see in Jeremiah, wholly other. Even those things call me, call us, into dangerous territory. It isn't easy to live our lives guided by God's Word.

The first 20 or so chapters of Jeremiah are filled with these poetic outpourings of God's Word. Again, Kathleen O'Connor has a scholar's eye view that divides the text into an outline with understandable bits. Roughly chapters 1-10 are about how the Israelites and Judeans are going to experience a destruction of their world as they've known it. Then chapters 11-20 are about the collapse of the covenant that was made between God and Israel. God's Word comes exactly as promised. The words put in Jeremiah's mouth are about destruction and being overthrown. They are about the sin of the people and their punishment. These words testify to the very real consequences that would come from breaking their side of the promise. God's faithfulness is still unquestioned. The faithfulness of the people, however, has come up lacking.

But just like we can look at who the prophets of scripture are and infer some things about who we might trust or not trust to be preachers and teachers of God's word today, we can also come to these texts and examine, how does God speak into the world? What do God's words sound like, taste like, feel like in the human heart? What should we be looking for in interpreting God's Word in today's context?

One of the things to notice first is how often God's voice comes through in metaphor. The book of Jeremiah does this a lot, and again, this is dangerous language. It's dangerous because it means that the *hearer* has to figure out what it means when God asks, "Is Israel a slave?" What does the hearer bring to that description? What about calling the people a thief or claiming that Israel has been an adulterous wife, and then say Judah has been even worse? If I use an image in my preaching, even if it's about family life, or my own dinner table – you may have such different experiences from me about those things that you see a totally different angle

than I was imagining when I said it. So even when we hear God's Word, directly, there is interpretation involved. We talk to others. We examine our own presumptions and when it comes to scripture, we may want to think about the lenses we use. The imagery of this unhappy family – God the faithful husband, Israel and Judah his unfaithful wives, and the kids who of course are acting out – might not be how God would choose to get our attention today. And yet, the shame and guilt that weigh heavy in these chapters might feel familiar.

Going back to what I actually read this morning from chapter 2 that introduces God's speech into the book of Jeremiah, God accuses Israel and Judah of betrayal and unfaithfulness. My hunch is that at times we feel that drift from God in our own lives – whether that's personal, or communal, or national. One of the things that my more conservative or evangelical peers are willing to point out that I think is spot on, is that when we lose God in our lives, consequences are bound to occur. Things will go awry. I'd like it to be a bit more nuanced sometimes because I'm also fully aware that bad things also happen to good people, and plenty of bad people have money stockpiled in ways I can't even imagine. So, its not always a straight line from point A (drift from God) to point B (something going wrong in your life). But on this bigger scale, and for Israel and Judah on a national identity scale, when they commit evil against God, they end up FEELING it, deeply. Chapter 2, Verse 13 is the gut-punch: "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." Our very life source water is the metaphor for God. God is what we need, and rather than drink from the fountain of living water, we rely on ourselves to build a container to capture God, and our containers are never able to hold who God is.

Yes, this book is a painful read. Shame. Destruction. Evil. Pollution. Choosing death over life. And Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, is called to deliver *this* news to those who won't want to hear it, priests and political leaders who will do everything but kill him to try and shut his mouth. We've always struggled to hear the prophets. Heck, I struggle to hear my husband's words when I know he is right in telling me I've been wrong. We don't like to examine our wrongdoing, and it hurts to have to change our behavior. The good news is that God's faithfulness always outpaces God's anger. God's anger must be dealt with. Ignoring it or pretending it doesn't exist really isn't our best move. But to know that God keeps on returning to us, loving us, maybe destroying us, but also rebuilding us, is the blessing of knowing the much longer story, of having Jeremiah's record to keep us sane during crazy times in our own histories.

There is much to see and learn from in this book. We'll keep at it for several weeks because I think it gives us hope for today, even as it also challenges us for today. In your own life, look for the prophetic words and complex metaphors. Talk to others, especially "different thinking" others about those words to see what we can learn of the bigger picture. Then, imagine where God's anger is challenging our world right now – because it is. And imagine where God's love is filling our world right now – because it is. Amen.