

"With The Bible In One Hand And A Newspaper In the Other"

(Jeremiah 1:1-10; Ephesians 5:6-20; John 17:1-2, 10-18)

Our journey through the Older Testament brings us today to the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was born into a priestly family around 645 BC. This was near the end of the long reign of King Manasseh (687-642). Manasseh had been an obedient puppet king for the powerful Assyrians. Thus under his rule, Judah had stability but at quite a cost--the cost of faithfulness to God.

While Jeremiah was a child, Manasseh's successors, Amon and Josiah, began reforms to help the nation turn back to God. And it was in the 13th year of King Josiah, in 627, that Jeremiah received what he described as an unmistakable and clear call from God. God said, "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."

Now Jeremiah was only 18 years old at the time of his call. Young enough to have dreams for himself, young enough to still want to enjoy life and old enough to be aware of the demands and commitments that God required of his prophets, and old enough to know that God's prophets tend to be mocked, humiliated, beaten, imprisoned, and threatened with death. So Jeremiah didn't jump at the chance of being God's prophet. Jeremiah said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

Jeremiah came up with an excuse. Maybe it was a stalling tactic, a way of giving himself some time to process the call from God. Maybe it was fear of where being God's prophet would lead him. Maybe it truly was the hesitancy of being only a boy and thus surely unable to do the job to which God was calling him.

But God responded, "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...for I am with you...." Then the Lord touched Jeremiah's mouth and gave him the words he would need.

Well, the prophet's life cannot be understood apart from the world in which he lives. So back to the history.....King Josiah was able to shake off Assyrian control. The king rededicated the nation and the people to God. But when King Josiah died in 609, the Babylonian empire arose as a new threat to Judah.

When Jeremiah looked around, he saw people turning from God to worship fertility deities. And he saw other ways that Judah was rebelling against God. So he spoke up. He condemned social practices that were unjust and dishonest and that injured the most vulnerable members of society. He was critical of Judah's foreign and military policies through which Judah sought security apart from God. He announced that God was using Babylon as an instrument of judgment--that God would have the last word with his prideful people. Jeremiah told the leaders and people of his nation stuff they didn't want to hear: that they were sinners; that God was going to judge them; that they needed to repent. Jeremiah told them that through their enemy, Babylon, God would put them in their place--discipline them for not listening to him and living according to his commandments. Jeremiah constantly proclaimed God's judgment upon the people of Judah, and this kept him in constant friction with the leaders and people of his nation. But Jeremiah spoke of God not as distant, cruel or uncaring. Instead, he spoke of God suffering and anguishing over his rebellious people. Jeremiah said that restoration and not destruction was God's aim. He was thus not only a prophet of judgment but also a prophet of hope, proclaiming God's desire to be in relationship with his people, God's desire to save his people.

A prophet of judgment and hope. Babylonians. Assyrians. Not exactly the stuff our lives are made of. But if we take a second look at our passage for today, we discover that it nonetheless has a lot to say to us.

From Jeremiah, we learn about God. We get a glimpse of how deeply God cares for us. In this world of five billion people, it's easy to feel as if we're just one of the faceless masses. But the story of Jeremiah portrays a God who notices each and every one of us. He knows us intimately, as if we are the only child he has. Remember Max Lucado's "If God Had a Refrigerator"?

If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, he'll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and he chose your heart. What about the Christmas gift he sent you in Bethlehem; not to mention that Friday at Calvary. Face it, friend. He's crazy about you." (A Gentle Thunder--Hearing God Through the Storm).

God not only, though, has a love for us. He also has a plan for each of us. He sees such promise in us that he wants us to join him in his healing work. He wants us to get involved in building his kingdom of light and love. The early 20th

century theologian Karl Barth said that God calls each of us to read with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. In other words, God created us to make a difference in the world. He knows we can make a difference in the world. And he wants us to make a difference in the world. Furthermore, he will give us whatever we need to do just this.

Our generous and loving God is not jealous of his power. He is eager to give us the words, the wisdom, whatever we need to live as his people in the world today. And can there be any doubt of how joyful he is when we allow our lives to change by answering his call? In "The God You're Looking For," Pastor Bill Hybels told of a woman who came up to him after the worship service and gave him a big hug. She was crying as she whispered in his ear, "Don't ever stop telling us that we matter to God, because it's changed my life." (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997, p. 11)

But from Jeremiah, we not only learn about the God who loves us, has faith in us, and generously gives us all that we need to live as his children in the world. From Jeremiah, we also learn about ourselves. We see ourselves in Jeremiah.

First, we see how prone we are to come up with excuses. "I am only a youth. I am only a middle aged person. I am only a senior citizen. I am only a woman. I am only one person. I don't have the time to get involved. I can't lead. I can't testify to God. I can't get up in front of everyone. I can't run that risk."

Second, we see that our excuses don't hold water. Our excuses don't work for at least two reasons. First, because God will be with us, and second, because God will give us everything we need to do what needs to be done. We don't have to rely on our knowledge or our wisdom or our skills. We just have to be obedient to God and trust him.

Jeremiah, Abraham, Gideon, Esther, Paul, Moses, David all felt fearful and inadequate when God called them. But when they obediently and trustingly answered the call, they discovered that God supplied what they needed to carryout their calling.

I love the old joke about the man who was asked if he could play a violin. He answered, "I don't know. I've never tried." This was pretty much the answer Scrip Schreiber gave me when I asked him if he could carve a manger scene. He said, "I don't know. But I'll try." And what a beautiful manger scene we have in

the church lobby because Scrip had the willingness to try, to place himself in God's hands, and to see what might materialize.

In the book The Miracle and Power of Blessing, Maurice Berquist writes of the parallel principle. It seems that if you place a copper wire parallel to overhead power lines, you get a transfer of power. Even though the copper wire isn't actually touching the overhead power lines or connected in any way to a generator, power will come to the copper wire as soon as it becomes parallel to the overhead lines. When we accept the calling God places on our lives, when we allow our lives to align parallel to his purpose, we suddenly and mysteriously and miraculously have a power we would have never thought possible.

A woman named Ethel Armstead knew she was moving into a high crime neighborhood. But what she didn't know was that numerous drug dealers were used to running their business off the front porch of her new house! She was told horror stories of the harassment and violence used by these drug dealers to intimidate anyone who messed with them. But Ethel Armstead didn't let her fear stand in the way of taking action. She knew that the God she worshiped had called her to make a difference in the world. Besides, she wanted to live in a neighborhood free of drugs and crime.

So Ethel began confronting the dealers. She was respectful, but firm, insisting that they move their business off her front porch. When they moved off the porch, Ethel became a little bolder. She talked them into moving their drug business off her block. After a while, the dealers began showing Ethel respect. In the winter, they shoveled snow off her sidewalk. They also began calling her "Mom."

Ethel began taking an interest in these young men's lives, and she encouraged them to do something useful with their time. She became involved in a community group that built playgrounds on abandoned lots. She also started an after-school program to keep kids off the streets, and she convinced the city council to redevelop abandoned buildings in her neighborhood. Her efforts revitalized her neighborhood, changed the way people looked at each other, and transformed her part of the world into being much more in line with God's kingdom.

Ultimately the book of Jeremiah makes us think about what it means to live as God's people in the world and times in which we live. What in our world and in our

time is causing God grief? What idols are people worshiping? Where are the poor and weak being exploited? Where is God calling us to get involved? Where would God have us work in the social and political processes of our world, plucking up and tearing down, building and planting toward the goal of justice and peace in all his creation? The book of Jeremiah is not about "cheap grace." It's about, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it, "costly discipleship," living our faith in the world, living our lives "with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other."

The word of the Lord came to a young fellow named Jeremiah. The word of the Lord, the call of the Lord, comes to each one of us. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; July 18, 2010