

Jeremiah 1:4-19

All, We're really just starting our walk through Jeremiah today, and I'm super excited about. Today is in some ways a preparation for what we'll see as we move forward in the book, but it's also an opportunity for us to consider Jeremiah himself, his state of faith, and what God seemed to need him to know to do God's work well.

Let's pray this isn't lousy, you know?

Prayer:

yup

Jeremiah's Call....:

We'll start with a crazy, famous passage.

The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

***“Before I formed you in the womb I knew[a] you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”***

Look. This passage gets used for all sorts of things. And all I can say about that is that I don't want to use this passage for anything other than what Jeremiah uses it for, which is God's initial declaration of chosenness over Jeremiah.

I don't think it's wise to build a theology of humanity from this passage. I simply don't. People will, you know? I mean, I think when I learned this passage it was taught to me as a reason why abortion ought to be illegal. And, I mean, whatever we believe about those two issues--illegality and abortion, which each deserve their own theological attention--to call this passage into play feels to me now like an improper use of Scripture.

Because this passage is for Jeremiah. It's for Jeremiah, it's not for us or for all humanity. And for Jeremiah, it's telling him something very, very specific. Jeremiah will react to it the same way all sorts of people--Moses, Isaiah, some of us, some in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul himself--have reacted to the news: with reticence and excuses.

But how it functions *for Jeremiah* is to tell him this:

You are set apart. You are a prophet to the nations. You are known by me. There is no accident in this.

And to say that this was true of him when he was in the womb is to say that it's certainly, definitely true of him now. This feels, to me, more in line with Timothy hearing that "the same faith that lived" in his grandmother and mother now lives in him.

But almost every time we see a faithful person confronted with the truth that God wants something from them, their first response is to back away as fast as possible. Moses claimed he couldn't speak well; Isaiah says he's a "man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips." Even the devil tried to get Jesus to doubt what he knew about his own worth in God's eyes.

And Jeremiah's Response:

Jeremiah follows suit. He responds this way:

"Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."

Two things. He can't speak; he's too young. Maybe related, but...maybe not. It feels like a dodge, and it should feel like a dodge. It is a dodge. But God is not going to let Jeremiah dodge.

God says this:

God's Response To Jeremiah's Response:

... "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.

In reaction to Jeremiah's reluctance, God says, "Don't." Don't give me your excuse. You've got to do this.

And we see this throughout the Old Testament, too. I think we see it best in Jonah, you know? That satirical, wacky prophetic book, in which Jonah does everything opposite what a good prophet should do. No one wants to be called by God, because to be called by God is to get hurt. Jeremiah is no dummy. He's clued in; we know he is. And it seems as if he's familiar with prophets and their words; again, hard to tell given just how edited this is. He knows prophecy. He may be simply saying he's too young and he can't speak because he has been, like, in prophet school and knows he's not graduated yet. To be called by God is costly. It costs.

God knows Jeremiah knows this, too. God doesn't hide it. "Don't be afraid of them." Those "them" who Jeremiah is automatically afraid of, because the "them" is out to get anyone like him, anyone who will be on Yahweh's side. And by saying this, of course, we realize that fear was what motivated Jeremiah's excuse to begin with.

God's Response: Truth vs. Experience

But to be told something, as we talked about when we talked about the Psalm of Lament, Psalm 42, never ever overcomes our emotions. So God promises what only God can promise-- His very own presence. "Don't be afraid" is the first thing Jesus says to his disciples when he comes back from the dead

and gathers with them. “I am with you always” is one of the last things he says before he is taken up to heaven in the gospel of Matthew. “I will rescue you” is “I will save you.”

Jeremiah is given what he needs to not be afraid of those who will antagonize him. He is given God’s presence and God’s promise of salvation. I think that the only thing that can overcome our fear, whatever it is, is the promise that God is with us and will save us. It’s the universal fear solvent. It’s the thing that can overcome any kind of fear that we have. God is with us and will save us.

God’s Response:

But let’s bring it back to Jeremiah, because again this is all for Jeremiah. What’s miraculous is that when Jesus says it to the early Church, it’s for them and us both. So if we start with the simple fact that everyone personalizes this passage, that’s fine, but we can do even better than that. Instead of simply personalizing for ourselves God’s words to Jeremiah, we can remember that Jesus has spoken words like this to us, practically the same words. I don’t know why we neglect the gifts we’re given by the Lord and choose to covent Jeremiah’s, but we do.

So God promises His presence and His rescue, His salvation. These are why Jeremiah has nothing to fear and doesn’t need to make excuses about the call--the work--that God has set him up for.

Of course, if we're generous here, Jeremiah isn't fearful but humble. My reading is, I guess, less generous. But it's influenced by the many, many others who resisted God's call at first, too. But just in case God's promise and God's presence aren't enough, God offers His power, too. We read this:

9 Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth.10 See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

This is not the only time in the Old Testament where lips themselves are touched by God or some holy thing as a symbol of the way God's own power is going to come through that person's speech. This is in practice--*at its heart*--what it means to be a prophet: To speak the words of God to those who need to hear them. That which Jeremiah needs God gives him. God empowers Jeremiah. And God describes the power Jeremiah's words.

Words Are Power:

Look, words are power. Speech is a creative act. I think of the world around us today. We live, as an article I read recently put it, "in a society in which consensus reality has shattered." We live in little word-filled bubbles, little logospheres, in

which what we say is true is said over and over and over until certain perspectives become recursive and self-reinforcing. What's true is not so much debated, as agreed upon by us and ours, and rejected by them and theirs. Whole groups of people no longer agree on what is real. What words give voice to will become the truth in terms of what we act upon...as long as we are only willing to hear the same views, perspectives, positions, facts or, geez, "alternative facts." We know that words power. And we know what can happen when enough people speak them.

But what's remarkable to me, I think, is the way in which here, it's Jeremiah who is told that his words will alter reality. Jeremiah's words, empowered--*charged up by God with real world-moving force*--are enough to, as God says, "uproot and teardown, destroy and overthrow, build and plant."

And notice this: These are words largely of destruction. Three couplets; the first two negative: "uproot and teardown, destroy and overthrow, build and plant."

Knowing what we know about Hebrew Poetry, we'd expect the last couplet to be negative, destructive, too. We can imagine Jeremiah's will giving out, as he realizes that this all consuming power from God is for pretty stark, terrible things...but then, the last couplet is offered, a pandora's hope, "to build and to plant." Jeremiah, as we'll see, is a book of largely condemnation, but...not entirely. There are things

as positive as new spring shoots, as a beautiful rehabbed house, as these things that bring hope and comfort and peace.

But you do wonder how Jeremiah could have focused on those, given the double emphasis on the bringing down that his God-empowered words would bring.

Confirmed:

And then, as far as the story goes, God jumps into it. Jeremiah's been called and protested; God's responded with promises of presence, of protection, of power. And having affirmed Jeremiah, God confirms him immediately. Again--we will just take Jeremiah the book as it comes, and fight against tearing it into the pieces that it often gets torn into when we're considering its formation.

We're given an introduction to a vision in the most classically prophetic way possible. "The word of the Lord arrived." Jeremiah is given a vision. (And, you know: "word" doesn't always mean "words." It often, when it comes to the prophets, is a whole package--a vision, an explanation of that vision, and often the process of spreading the news about that inspired information to others.) We're no more given the mechanics of this than we are explained just how God touched Jeremiah's mouth. Regardless, we read:

The word of the Lord came to me: "What do you see,

Jeremiah?”

“I see the branch of an almond tree,” I replied.

The Lord said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.”

This actually makes sense if we speak Hebrew, and never ever will if we don't. “Watching” sounds like “almond tree” in Hebrew. When it comes to visions, God loves puns. In this unique way, some of us are like God; claim it if it fits. But this is an ominous pun. So close on the heels of Jeremiah's call and his affirmation of Jeremiah is the promise, here, that what Jeremiah sees and says will come to pass. That's great if God is offering us ponies and candy, but remember: Two of the three couplets weren't cheerful stuff.

The word of the Lord came to me again: “What do you see?”

“I see a pot that is boiling,” I answered. “It is tilting toward us from the north.”

The Lord said to me, “From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms,” declares the Lord.

“Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem; they will come against all her surrounding walls and against all the towns of Judah.

Oof, right? I mean, Jeremiah’s first prophetic vision is a promise that his prophetic visions are going to come true, and his second one is a promise that “the northern Kingdoms”-- which basically means here Assyria and their partner-slash-vassal kingdoms--are on their way.

First, I appreciate so much that Jeremiah’s visions are these relatively normal things. A little pot pouring out some water, an almond branch. Everyday things! But these everyday things are given importance that has to be noticed and declared.

Secondly, remember, the word of the Lord isn’t a description of something, to declare it is a creative act, it’s to make it so in some real way. To have this meaning given to this vision is as good as if the tragedy has happened...for those with eyes to see, and ears to hear, of course. Jeremiah has these. Those few who pay attention to Jeremiah has these.

Why?

And so God continues, answering the first question that comes to mind whenever tragedy strikes: “Why?”

The first hunger we have in the face of terrible news, in the face of a terrible experience, is “Why?” Why is Assyria on their way? Why are they coming to destroy us?

And the answer is...heart-breaking, really.

16 I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made.

This is why. Idolatry is why.

Some of us have been walking through Exodus together on Sunday morning. And one thing is very, very clear from Exodus: God’s People are meant to be God’s People alone. You cannot be both God’s People, pledge ultimate allegiance and loyalty to God, depend on God’s sustaining power and provision, and also pledge ultimate allegiance and loyalty to some other person, place, or thing, depend on the sustaining power and provision of some other person place or thing. And there are reasons for this, incredibly basic reasons: God is God alone. Idolatry is giving ultimate allegiance and authority to that which doesn’t deserve it, can’t bear the weight of it, and was fundamentally made. What’s made--like we people--are meant only to worship that which isn’t made--God: Father-Son-Spirit. So to orient our lives and our attention around the demands, claims, and rules of a created thing is

simply disastrous, undoes what it means to be God's People. Breaks down the thing that binds God's People together, and upholds each one individually.

And of course, idolatry for us is usually a metaphor--we don't actually offer regular worship or clear pledges of allegiance to something--but even Jesus noted that "you cannot serve both God and money," that the things of this world can claim God-deserving attention, service, and value, be as big a source of devotion as God can be.

Why is Judah going to be judged? Because they've brought down on themselves the judgments promised when they entered into their special, marriage-like relationship with God. They've abandoned God, like a spouse abandons a spouse, they've decided to worship idols made by their own hands as if those idols were God. When they shook off God they shook off the provision and protection their covenant with God brought them, and put on, instead, the bleak side of the promises that they made with God.

Another Need for Reassurance:

But Jeremiah is not a dummy. He knows what we've always known: The messenger gets shot. The bearer of bad news is the one who gets punished. People rage at whoever calls them out. And God knows that all that worry Jeremiah just felt is still there. So God tells him, again:

17 “Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. 18 Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. 19 They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.

Here’s what I love in this: God doesn’t pretend that Jeremiah’s work is going to be easy, that it won’t cost him, that it won’t threaten him. “They will fight against you.” God says, instead: If you give into your fear, you will find me fearful, too. “Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them.”

All sorts of lessons could be made from this: Do we realize that when we give into emotions that are faithless, that don’t take faith into account, we almost always perceive God through the same faithless lens? If Jeremiah gives into the fear he has of those who threaten him in light of his bad news, he will begin to be afraid of the same God they are afraid of. His fear of them will infect his relationship with God with fear. But what God wants, needs Jeremiah to know, and to trust in, is that “I am with you and will rescue you.” We hear it again, and not by accident.

And, look, Jeremiah is called to bad news, mostly. This initial call of God isn't sugar-coated, there's no promise that, in the end, everything will be glorious. There's just reality. And I do find that incredibly refreshing. God is not making light of how difficult Jeremiah's work will be, how tested his faith will be, how bad the news he has to share is. God is simply saying that in spite of all of that, "I am with you and I will rescue you."

And I've already mentioned it, but let me mention it again, just like God reassured Jeremiah more than once.

Christians:

Our call is not Jeremiah's call, no matter how much of Jeremiah we see in ourselves or our own lives. But we are given the exact same promises as Jeremiah, only more so. "Lo, I am with you always until the end of the age." When the author of Hebrews quotes God as saying "I will never leave you nor forsake you," it's Jesus he has in mind.

We have promises of presence, of power, of protection, too. Like Jeremiah's only more so, and one of the major, major ways this "more so" comes out is that Jeremiah's call is a deeply isolating, lonely one. Jeremiah's call is a lonely one.

He is called to stand against almost everyone; we are called to stand with almost everyone, even as we speak truth in love to one another, and truth against power to those who

would “tickle our ears” with whatever we want to hear.

I suppose, if I were being a good preacher, I’d focus on how we can’t allow what Judah allowed in the first place, how we have to resist idolatry. But...I dunno. First of all, none of us that I know of have home alters and worship literal idols, and secondly, I think by now we get that we must, must be careful of what we pledge allegiance to, what ideology, philosophy, or means of curating society we serve, and of allowing any cultural construct--money, government, denominationalism, I dunno--to trick us into being beholden to its purposes instead of God’s, and to serve it and the benefits it gives us, rather than serve the Lord.

A Set-Up:

But I don’t want to focus on this. I want to set us up, in some ways for what we’re going to see as we continue in this book. And what I really want us to realize is that while we can personalize Jeremiah if we want to, take lessons from his particular life and all, I first of all think we should be very, very careful about it, and secondly just want us to realize there’s just no need for it. As we move forward in this long, rambling, expansive book, and walk with this raging, grieving prophet, we need to keep in mind our own promises that God will protect us, will provide for us, and will be present with us. We need to remember our loyalties and allegiances.

We also need to remember the subtle, sublime trick that our

worst emotions play on us. When we give into fear or any other kind of faithless feeling, we will fall into the traps we are trying to avoid. God will seem to us like the very worst thing that we feel. The anger, betrayal, and frustration that our faith was meant to protect us from can cause us to believe God is an angry, scary, betrayer. If that happens, it's a sign some poison has settled into our hearts, and our great gift is that we're a part of a community of healers who can help turn us away from our faithlessness, restore us to our right mind, and purify our hearts with each other's love.

Conclusion:

Thank God you're not Jeremiah. He had a hard calling, but God was with him. He had bad news to share. We have calling to share good news, and God is still with us, closer than ever. As we move forward in this book we'll see all sorts of ways in which Jeremiah set up God's People so that we, thousands of years later, experience God with the fullness we do. But let's allow his hard calling to remind us of Christ's hard calling, and all the presence, power, and provision Jesus has joyfully passed onto us in spite of it.

Jeremiah 1:4-19: Going Deeper

- How have you heard or seen today's passage used? How have you used it yourself?
- Is there anything in God's interaction with Jeremiah that seems familiar?
- What does God promise Jeremiah? Describe it as simply as you can.
- How is a Christian's call and relationship with God both like and unlike Jeremiah's relationship with God?
- Is there anything you can take to heart--or to practice--from today's passage?