

A surprising choice

Jeremiah 1:4-10 (August 21, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Have you ever been assigned a task that you felt wholly inadequate to complete? Maybe it was something you were given because no one else wanted to do it. But you felt some responsibility, so you reluctantly said “OK.” Maybe you lacked knowledge, skills or training. Or maybe you lacked experience. Maybe you lacked support.

These sorts of things happen all the time: In our working lives, in our family life, and also in the church. We are often stretched beyond what we think we are capable of. *We* take on jobs because no one *else* will do them.

So in that awkward silence, when everyone else is looking away, something inside prompts us to raise our hand. “Alright, I guess I can do that.” And others in the room breathe a collective sigh of relief.



Hard jobs, lonely tasks, difficult words to speak. Why should such things fall upon our shoulders? The prophet Jeremiah must have asked that very same question.

In our reading today, we hear about his call. “The word of the LORD came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you ... I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

And I can just imagine Jeremiah thinking to himself, “Where did that voice come from?” And “Why me?” And “Shouldn’t you be asking somebody else, more qualified?”

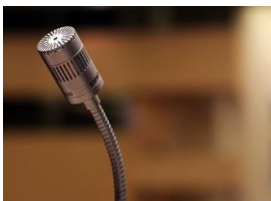
But the Lord did *not* ask somebody else. This job was for Jeremiah, had always been for Jeremiah. Somehow, in the great grand scheme of things, God latched on to the idea that Jeremiah would be just the person for the job.



It took some convincing. Because Jeremiah pushed back. He believed, quite sincerely that God’s choice was not a good one. That there really ought to be someone better, someone far more qualified than he.

All Jeremiah can think of is his own inadequacy. He puts forward two good reasons, in the hope that he can convince God to move on and find someone else.

“For one thing,” says Jeremiah, “I’m not a good public speaker.” He knows what a prophet is meant to do: speak the word of God. And that requires certain skills.



A prophet should be articulate, have a way with words, be able to make a positive impression upon the audience, even move them, both inwardly and outwardly, toward some tangible response.



An *older* Prophet Jeremiah, from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, by Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1511.

“Ah, Lord God! Truly ...” says Jeremiah. “I mean this in the *sincerest* possible way ... *Truly* I do not know how to speak.” It’s a little funny when you think about it, because he speaks well enough to make his case to God.

But Jeremiah does elicit our sympathy. There are some people who don’t love to speak. The last thing in the world they want to do is have to get up and say something in front of a crowd. “I’ll be the best man at your wedding, I’ll stand beside you when you make your vows ... but please, *please* don’t ask me to give a speech. Don’t ask me to read scripture or say a prayer. Don’t ask me to teach a lesson. I’m the *quiet* type, way more comfortable in the background.”

“Truly, Lord, I do not know how to speak. So if that’s what you want, maybe you’d better find someone else.”



“Not only that,” says Jeremiah, “but I am only a boy. Who’s going to listen to a young person like me?” Just a boy. A “na’ar” in Hebrew, usually refers to a child under the age of 10.¹ Jeremiah may be exaggerating, but he feels he’s too young to have much experience or credibility.



Would you invite a ten year old to preach a sermon? Would you consult with a young girl or boy in Grade 5 about important decisions, directions, choices for your life? Would you see them as a source of spiritual wisdom and guidance? Do you think God can use such persons, maybe even call them to be prophets to the rest of us?

“No Lord, truly, I am not the one you are looking for. If you choose me, my ministry will be completely ineffective. I’m sure there’s someone else who would do much better.”



But, you see, sometimes God does not easily take “no” for an answer. God is quite abrupt with Jeremiah, and openly rebukes him. “Do not say ‘I’m only a boy.’ ... You will go where I send you. You will speak what I command.”

Might God be *annoyed* with our excuses? Even ones that are sincere and well meant? Ones that we consider to be in the very best interest of God? (As if our sight was better than God’s sight.)

“Truly Lord, I don’t know how ... I’m only this, or only that ...” “Stop right there,” says God. “When I called you to be my disciple, did you think I didn’t know what I was doing?”



God makes a most remarkable claim about Jeremiah. And it’s a claim that God might very well repeat about *our* lives too: “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.”

Somehow, God has a plan in mind for Jeremiah. A plan that even Jeremiah might not be aware of. God knows who we are. Knows us far better than we even know ourselves. We can spend a lifetime discerning our

¹ John Holbert, <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/gods-odd-choices-john-holbert-01-30-2013>, Accessed August 17, 2022.

gifts, finding the courage to be faithful. Every day we learn something more about ourselves and the world we live in. And more about the God who loves us and claims us as God's very own.

God already knows us inside out. Our strengths, our weaknesses. Our successes, our failures. None of this is a surprise to our loving Lord, who sees things we cannot see, and calls us to livelihoods and vocations we cannot fully imagine.

"I know you," says God. I know your limitations. And I know your sincere belief that you are not the person who should be doing this. "But I have a *purpose* for you. And I don't make mistakes. I have a calling for you. And I'm eager that you fulfill it."



Jeremiah was not the first to protest against the call of God. Remember Moses?

God came to him in a burning bush and called him to deliver God's people from slavery in Egypt. And Moses protested several times: "Who am I to go to Pharaoh?" he asked. "Who will I say has sent me? ... What if the people do not believe me?" (Exodus 3-4) And finally this: "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10) Does that sound familiar? Jeremiah isn't the first to try this trick!



By Gebhard Fugel, c. 1920

Many of God's prophets displayed the same reticence to take up the task that God had given them. Isaiah confessed that he was a man of unclean lips, unworthy to proclaim the message of the Lord. (Isaiah 6:5)

The apostle Paul said: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are ..." (1 Corinthians 1:26-28)

"Across four decades of ministry," notes one writer, "Jeremiah struggled mightily with God's call on his life, with a sense of failure, with virulent opposition from detractors, and with deep discouragement."² He often questioned what he was doing, and why.

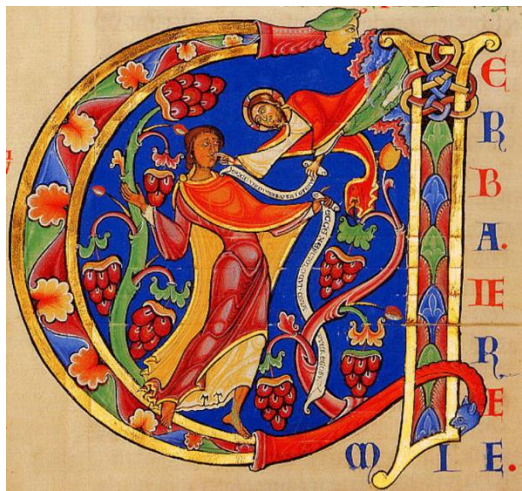
Being the person God wants us to be, doing the things God wants us to do – these tasks are not necessarily *easy*. Nor do they result in swift *success*. But God still calls us.



God answers Jeremiah's complaint in two ways. First something that *directly* addresses his objection: "I cannot speak," says Jeremiah. Don't worry about that, says God.

² "The Call of Jeremiah: Human Struggle with the Divine Summons" by Daniel Clendenin, *The Journey With Jesus*, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20070122JJ.shtml>, Accessed August 19, 2016.

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched his mouth; and the LORD said to him, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.’”



God gave to Jeremiah words to speak, words that Jeremiah did not have.

On your bulletin cover this morning a is picture taken from The Winchester Bible, a Romanesque illuminated manuscript produced in Winchester, England, between 1160 and 1175. Bibles in that time were written on calf-skin, and lavishly illuminated with colourful pigments and beautiful designs.

This image shows an ornate capital letter. And you can see two characters: the prophet Jeremiah and the heavenly Christ, the living word of God. He is touching Jeremiah’s mouth. He *gifts* Jeremiah with the word Jeremiah is called to speak.



Ministry does not entirely depend on *us*. It is the work of God, who graciously calls us. And lovingly gifts us with all that we need to live out that calling.

We do *not* have what is required. We cannot speak, we cannot do, we cannot be. But God reaches out to us, loves us, lifts us, guides us. Gifts us what we need to accomplish God’s purpose. God determines what is good for us to have.

We see all too clearly the things we lack: The gaps in our abilities. The sense of inadequacy we bear within. The fears that hold us back and prevent us from moving forward in God’s way. “I cannot do this,” we say. And our gracious, loving Lord answers, “I know that. I will give you what you need.”

We never think we have enough. And the truth is, we don’t! Because that is *precisely* what allows room in our lives for the gracious work of God. “Trust me, Jeremiah. I see things in your life you cannot see. I see the great unfolding of human history through the ages, far beyond your lifetime. I see your part in a *bigger* picture.”



The poet, writer and farmer, Wendell Berry hints at the mysterious, unseen work of God in poem that he has written:

“Harvest will fill the barn;” he writes. “for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled



And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.”³

Great work is done! And it is *always* God who does it. When we feel inadequate, God works to fulfill a larger purpose.



One more thing: There is a great *promise* God gives to Jeremiah, and to us. It is the promise of divine presence. “Do not be afraid of them, for *I am with you* to deliver you, says the LORD.”

“Do not say I am only a boy.” Too young. Or too *old* ... Age is *not* a determining factor to the God who called a young Samuel and an elderly Sarah; a young David and an ancient Methuselah; a young Jeremiah and a congregation that will soon be celebrating its 90th Anniversary.

“I am with you. Whatever happens. When you stand up tall, when you fall flat on your face – *I am with you*. When people listen, and when they don't – I am with you. You are not alone, Jeremiah.” *We* are not alone.



I want you to take a moment and close your eyes. And listen. Is there a voice ... an urge within you, a persistent prompting that comes from God ... To be more loving, perhaps? More patient, more generous, more just, more open?

To say “yes” to Jesus and his call to be a disciple? To step forward in your journey, into what you do not know? To trust that God will be with you in whatever days may lie ahead? To speak, to pray, to learn, to grow? To give, to receive?

- What is God's call in your life this day?
- What is keeping you from answering that call?
- And now finally, what is the word of grace, the promise, the hope God has for you?

Now, you may open your eyes. God made a surprising choice in choosing Jeremiah to be a prophet. God often makes surprising choices. One of those choices may be God's call to you!

³ Wendell Berry, “Poem X” from 1979 in *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems*, <https://indycrowe.com/2018/12/15/wendell-berry-poem/>, Accessed August 20, 2022.