

**Theme: Callings | Sermon: “Hearing God’s Call” | Judy Gatewood-Keim,
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Scriptures: 1Corinthians 13:1-3 and 7-13 & Jeremiah 1: 4-10

In some ways maybe the Old Testament prophets were tough. When God first appears to them there isn’t the immediate reassurance to “fear not”. It is only after that person gives a reason to not want to do what God asks does God then tell them to not fear and give a specific reassurance. I wonder why that is?

Our recent Advent series was on not letting fear get the best of us. Yet human nature is always human nature. It is too easy to make our first reaction fear, especially fear of the unknown or different. I asked earlier for you to share any calls you experienced. Even in this safe space I am willing to say many, if not most of you, had a first reaction of fear or hesitation. You might have thought others wouldn’t understand. Maybe you thought it wasn’t really a God thing, just a thing. That is what I would think. Was it easier to think about sharing a call after one person shared theirs?

I looked up “biblical definition of a prophet. One source stated, “a prophet is someone God uses to bring encouragement, strength, and correction in line with God’s word” using 1st Corinthians 14:3 as the base for the definition. If you felt a call to “share a cup of water with someone” or bring the beauty of the kingdom of heaven to earth, would that not be speaking or acting or being a person carrying God’s encouragement and strength into the world?

I am sure if God showed up to me and asked me to do something I knew would result in my life radically changing, I would have questions. Is this really you God? Are you sure about this? Fear, and at best hesitation, would be my default.

Jeremiah is one of the longest books of the Bible second only to the Psalms. We also seem to have more biographical information about the person of Jeremiah than any other prophet. Jeremiah was active during a great crisis in Israel’s history and a time of major geopolitical upheaval in the ancient Near East. I chose Jeremiah out of the four lectionary scripture choices of Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament and gospel readings. I think because I like a challenge and how many messages do you recall from Jeremiah, and because of what we are experiencing nationally and hopefully to encourage and strengthen each other. Ecclesiastes tells us what was once before will be again.

Some of you might be familiar with Walter Brueggemann, who happened to live in Traverse City. Brueggemann is widely considered one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of the last several decades.

He wrote in the introduction to one of his commentaries on Jeremiah—yes, he has written more than one--this: “The text has the powerful capacity to cause us to discern our own situation, to experience our situation in quite new ways, and to participate in our own historical situation with new liberty and fresh passion . . . with faithfulness.”

He goes on “This text does not require ‘interpretation’ or ‘application’ so that it can be brought near our experience and circumstance. Rather, the text is so powerful and compelling, so passionate and uncompromising in its anguish and hope, that it requires we submit our experience to it and thereby re-center our experience on new terms. The text does not need to be *applied* to our situation. Rather our situation needs to be *submitted* to the text for a fresh discernment. . . In every generation this text subverts all our old readings of reality and forces us to a new dangerous, obedient reading.”

Dr. Brueggemann is describing the power of Scripture, the power which can prevail even though so much separates us from the historical situation of the Biblical people. Jeremiah’s starting points and ours are very different, in the ways that we understand the world and especially in how we envision God. What we are going to try to do today, as Brueggemann suggests, is to allow the anguish and the hope of the text to speak for itself.

Context is always important. It is crucial for our understanding of Jeremiah. The first chapter of Jeremiah fixes the beginning of his ministry in the reign of King Josiah. Josiah was king of Judah at the point where Assyria’s power was in decline. He was king when a lost scroll was found in the Temple. He used that scroll, which was probably something like the book of Deuteronomy, to launch political and religious reform. Because Assyria’s power was waning, Josiah was able to exert his influence not only over Judah, but also over much of the former northern kingdom of Israel which had been taken over by Assyria 100 years earlier. He tore down shrines to Yahweh, and to other gods, which were scattered across the territory, and centralized worship in Jerusalem. It was one of the most extensive and far-reaching reforms in Israel’s history, although it didn’t last long. Many may have experienced this as a re-assertion of Israel’s former glory.

This is the context in which Jeremiah begins his lifetime of prophecy. Jeremiah’s call follows the pattern of many others. God states a divine purpose. And hasn’t that purpose remained consistent? Jeremiah objects that he is too young, too inexperienced to speak on behalf of God. This is what those called by God often do. Moses said that he was unskilled, Isaiah that he was unworthy, Ezekiel that he wouldn’t know what to say. The next step in the pattern is usually that God reaffirms the call and often, there is some mechanism of putting the word of God into the future prophet.

Isn’t that part of what we try to do each time we gather together? Put God’s spirit and words into ourselves. To find faith, hope and love for now, the near future and long term. A certain degree of humility, of surprise that God would choose you, seems necessary for the prophetic task.

Jeremiah is reluctant and humble, but also courageous. He must accept and own his calling if he is to be of service. We hear God in the words of other people. And, scary thought, sometimes other people hear or fail to hear God in the things we say to them. We might set expectations or limitations without even realizing it.

Rev Donlay tells a story about the church where she served when she was a seminary student. The pastor of that church was the first woman pastor that church ever had. But she was the only pastor the children had ever known. One day, in the preschool room, they were playing church. One of the boys wanted to be the preacher, but the girls knew better. With the confidence of the truth of their own experience they said “You can’t be the preacher. Only girls can be the preacher.”

Context matters. The pages of the Bible and of history are littered with people who doubted their ability or value or worth. And often, those doubts were absorbed from other people.

What is your calling, what is our calling, in our current context? I suggest we have a duty of care. And a responsibility to each other, to keep one another's courage up, to strengthen our mutual resilience. Beyond that, we can seek to open ourselves to the call of God however it might come, not allowing ourselves to be limited by previous expectations. We might need to tune into a new reality and carefully consider the opportunities God is putting in front of us.

I am grateful for the many acts of those in this congregation, even if I have no idea that you have done them. A cup of cold water given in the name of Jesus is valuable. We have come through a pandemic, the rising movement for people's liberties, and emerging forms of church. For some, anxiety and animosity seem as suffocating as wildfire smoke.

I think about how Jeremiah continued to confront and comfort, to challenge and console his people through one of the most terrifying periods in their history. I pray that God will call out the Jeremiah's in our time and that you and I will be receptive to the claim that God makes on us.

Our task will not be to be like Jeremiah, but to listen to him. The words God placed in his mouth were about plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing, and building and planting. These terms are repeated throughout his ministry. Someone has characterized his message as 2/3 doom and 1/3 hope. There were vested interests who resisted the plucking and destroying and others who resisted the building and planting. No wonder Jeremiah is nicknamed the weeping prophet.

I wonder how deeply we can listen to Jeremiah in his time. I wonder whose voices we are listening to right now. Are they politicians? Journalists? Artists or musicians? Are we listening to the voices of our elders? To preachers who feel wholly inadequate? Or how about, are we trying to listen for the voices of the unheard?

God is calling, can we hear? Ecclesiastes also tells us there is a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to tear down and a time to build. This is echoed in Jeremiah's call: Today I appoint you to stand up against nations and kingdoms. Some you must uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow. Others you must build up and plant." Let us continue as individuals and as a congregation to be in discernment as to what actions we take in the spirit of God's love. It will always be ongoing.

These many voices have been speaking for a long time. Jeremiah delivered his message for forty years before its truth was vindicated. I wonder if we might be getting close to a time when we can hear the truth and the urgency of our own need for change and a return to covenantal faithfulness.

Let me conclude with the words of Walter Brueggemann. He warns us not to misread our context, but to believe in God's faithful power and love. "If we fail to hear," he writes, "Like the ancient exiles, we may imagine that our situation is occupied only by despair and alienation, that God's arm is shortened and there is none to comfort. We shall miss the summons home, the faint beginnings of new laughter in Jerusalem and shall still be submitting to the empire when we could be on our way rejoicing."

Beloved ones, may we hear God's call. And in this season, may we respond with humility and courage and obedience. May we be on our way home rejoicing. Amen.