

# ***A Reluctant Prophet and a Persistent God***

**Jeremiah 1:4-10; 7:1-11**

**Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese**

**November 23, 2014**

I debated preaching this sermon from the doorway, just as Jeremiah preached his temple sermon in the gate of the temple. What difference does it make where one stands to speak? Does it sound different if spoken in the doorway, rather than from the pulpit?

It's an interesting welcoming strategy as well, to speak this message from the doorway into the church:

*"Change your ways and stop what you are doing, and I will let you live in this land. <sup>4</sup> Do not rely on the misguided words, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,' as if the temple's presence alone will protect you. <sup>5</sup> But if you genuinely change your ways and stop what you are doing; if you deal with each other fairly; <sup>6</sup> if you don't oppress foreigners, orphans, and widows; if you don't shed the blood of the innocent in this land; and if you don't practice the self-destructive worship of other gods; <sup>7</sup> then I will let you live forever in this land I promised your ancestors long ago.*

*<sup>8</sup> "But instead, you are clinging to lies and illusions that are worthless. <sup>9</sup> Do you think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and chase after other gods and still expect Me to protect you? <sup>10</sup> Do you think all it takes is for you to run back to Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We're safe now'? Does this somehow make it all right to do these vile things in front of Me? <sup>11</sup> Do you think this house, which is called by My name, is a den of thieves? I see what you're doing. (The Voice)*

Jeremiah is like the street preacher who stands on the street corner and preaches his message to everyone who walks by. We typically experience street preachers as odd, or fanatical; people who are out of touch with the "real world", who don't care that no one listens to them. We find them intrusive and annoying.

I wonder if that's how Jeremiah's community experienced him. I mean, he bombards the temple worshippers with these accusations of their sin and what will happen to them if they don't change their ways. He interrupts their regular worship attendance with words that tell them they're doomed. One commentator, reflecting on the image of Jeremiah as street preacher, also compared us to the temple-goers. ([workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), narrative podcast, either Rolf Jacobson or Craig Koester) This commentator said those who see themselves as true worshippers would discount his message, just as we discount the messages of street preachers when we pass them--I don't need to listen to this, I go to church; I don't need this tract, I'm already a Christian. Those were the people to whom Jeremiah was directing his message--those who were entering the temple were the regular

churchgoers, those who considered themselves good, faithful people. He was speaking to those who attended worship regularly, those who saw themselves as pious and sincere. If we're honest with ourselves, that's us--we see ourselves as being true worshippers and sincere Christians, for the most part. Would we believe Jeremiah if he stood at the entrance to our church building?

Our story today takes place about a century after Isaiah. The Assyrians, who were the superpower during Isaiah's time, are on the decline, and Babylon is rising in power. This is a time of great international upheaval, and into this time, Jeremiah is called to speak the words of God to the people of Judah and the world. He is the longest serving prophet that we know about. His career spanned 4 decades, from the reforms that took place under King Josiah in 622 BCE, through to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BCE.

There is a lot about Jeremiah's call that is similar to the call of other prophets:

\*God speaks: Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations.

\*Jeremiah protests: Ah, Lord God! I don't know what to say for I'm only a boy.

\*God responds to his protest: Don't say you're too young; you'll go to all to whom I send you; you shall speak what I command you; don't be afraid of them, for I will deliver you.

\*And then God commissions him by touching his mouth: I have put my words in your mouth. I appoint you over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

However, there are significant differences between his call and the call of other prophets. While God is definitely taking the initiative in the call of Jeremiah, it is much stronger and more extended in other calls, like the call of Moses, where God appears in a burning bush; or the call of Isaiah, where he sees God sitting in a throne with seraphs in attendance. Other prophets experienced visions as part of their call, as signs that God was present with them. Jeremiah's visions come after his call--they confirm his call and point toward the message he will speak. (Patrick Miller, *Jeremiah*, New Interpreters' Bible, Vol. VI, p. 579)

Another unique feature of the call of Jeremiah, is that it is clear he was predestined to be a prophet. He wasn't called out of another career or occupation; he had nothing else to fall back on. He was chosen before he was even formed in his mother's womb. There appears to be no escape for him from this call. Of course, we know in other calls, like the call of Moses, that God is persistent in that call, but there is a negotiation and a response to Moses' protests, that indicates some sense of choice, or at least accommodation in

answer to Moses' protests. We don't find that in Jeremiah's call. How does one argue with, "But this is why you were formed, to be my voice to the nations"?

What we do learn in Jeremiah's call is important for Jeremiah to know in fulfilling his call. Before he was formed in his mother's womb, God knew him. The biblical sense of knowing has 2 meanings: the sense of choosing someone, and the sense of watching over or caring for someone. Certainly God knew Jeremiah in the sense of choosing him. The second meaning becomes an even more important aspect of his call: before Jeremiah was even born, God was watching over him and protecting him.

Of all the prophets in the Old Testament, Jeremiah reveals more of his personal anguish about his call than any other prophet. He wrestles with God in 20:7-9: "O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'violence and destruction!' For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." This message that God has given him to speak, is so powerful, so all-consuming, that Jeremiah can do nothing else but speak.

He lives out his call, but it is a great sacrifice for him, and it is difficult. It was probably no small comfort to know that before he was even born, God was watching over him and protecting him, and that protection, that kind of knowing, continued throughout his career. He proceeds in chapter 20, to praise God and proclaim God's presence, even in the midst of his struggle with living out his call, and preaching the message God gave him.

2 more unusual aspects of his call are that he was consecrated, or set apart--something that is usually reserved for priests; and he was set as a prophet to the nations--usually prophets are called to speak to their own people. While Jeremiah isn't consecrated as a mediator of God's holiness in the sanctuary, the temple, he is called to proclaim God's holiness and its demands in the streets of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah calls the people to have their behaviour match their beliefs. They are called to come to worship, and then to take what they have sung and prayed and heard into the streets, to live out in their daily lives, what they affirmed in worship. Jeremiah's message is that you can't say one thing in the temple, and then live contrary to that outside the temple, and then come back to the temple as a kind of good luck charm. You can't say, "I'm baptized", and then live as if you've never made baptismal vows, but then come back to church and claim your baptism. The temple, for Israel, represents the dwelling place of God. It is a powerful symbol of divine presence and security, and to treat it as insurance against unjust living was an offense to the God who lived there. Jeremiah's sermon in chapter 7 challenges the people to think about where their ultimate trust lies--in God, or in the temple. If their trust doesn't lie in God but only in the temple, if the way they live

doesn't display the basics of the faith, basics of peace and justice, then the temple is meaningless. (Miller, p. 641)

The book of Jeremiah has some beautiful passages of comfort and hope, like 29:11--for surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope; and 31:31-34--The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

While these and others are passages that comfort and give hope, most of Jeremiah's words were not words of comfort. He is a hard-hitting prophet whose words convict rather than comfort. It is clear from the moment God calls him, that he is speaking on behalf of God, not himself. The message he brings, the words he speaks, are God's words, not his. He isn't called to preach, but to be a messenger. Jeremiah's call and God's response to his objections send the message to Jeremiah's audience that these words come from God, not Jeremiah. (Miller, p.582) Perhaps that is a small comfort to him, even though he suffers greatly at the hands of his fellow Israelites for speaking these words.

The Bible presents a clear picture of the true prophet. One of the criteria of a true prophet is that they did not go looking for this job. Every call of every great prophet in the Bible involved objection on the prophet's part; it involved a resistance to the call. It involved pointing out all the ways in which they are not suited to this role--I don't know what to say, I'm too young, I don't speak well. God's response to these objections is to point out that it really doesn't matter about ability or capacity; in fact, it is better if the person has no ability, for then it is God at work, not the person. The prophet is the vessel of the divine word, and in Jeremiah, we see that clearly. It isn't about the person who is called, it is about God.

The challenge for the people of Jeremiah's time, was discerning the voice of the true prophet against the false prophet. The challenge for us is whether we believe there are any prophets today. Who speaks for God today? We are a cynical and skeptical people, who doubt that God speaks at all today. If someone claims to speak for God, we quickly write them off as delusional. In other times, and in other parts of the world, the question of true and false prophets is a real question. But for us in North America, the question is do we trust anyone today to speak for God? We live as if no one has a claim on us; therefore we can sit back and relax because that belief--that no one has a claim on us, acts as a buffer between us and anyone who would make a claim on us. We want to keep our

options open; don't want to cast our lot with anyone. In some ways, we are so concerned about making a space for all voices, that we have a hard time discerning God's voice. (workingpreacher.org, narrative podcast, either Rolf Jacobson or Craig Koester) And I think we have a hard time with remembering that it isn't about the person who is speaking, it is about God and what God is doing and wanting us to hear.

Our Anabaptist belief in communal discernment is an important part of who we are, and can help us to discern the voice of God. The thing we forget, or struggle with, is that discernment happens in community, it takes a long time; it is hard work; and it requires us to hold our own convictions firmly, yet lightly enough that we can hear the voice of the other in a way that allows the other to potentially be right. Discernment involves trusting in the other to be as faithful as I am; honouring them and believing the best about them.

It is easy to walk past the Jeremiahs in the doorways of our world and their hard-hitting messages. It is easy to ignore the voice of the street preacher, blocking our way, intruding into our day. It is hard to sort through all the voices and messages we hear day in and day out. This work of listening; this work of speaking is hard work.

So what might it mean to stand in the doorways of our world, our lives and our churches and listen for God? What might it mean to stand at important thresholds of decision-making and discernment and listen for God's voice? Perhaps, unlike Jeremiah who was called to speak, we are being called to listen.

In the midst of the seige of Jerusalem, Jeremiah, confined in the court of the king of Judah, buys a plot of land as a symbol that houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. During a period of great turmoil, of destruction and loss, when the people doubted that God was with them, when they in fact were convinced that God had forgotten them, Jeremiah was a symbol of hope and God's presence. Even though he speaks about judgement and destruction, he buys a piece of land, and by his actions, points to a time of restoration and hope.

Those times in the gateways, at the doorways, on the thresholds between what was and what might be, are times when God speaks and acts. God give us ears to hear.