

For the next few Sundays we are going to look at select passages in the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is one of the longest books in the Bible – surpassed in number of pages of text only by the book of Psalms. It's 52 chapters in length- chronicling the forty years of the prophet's ministry (NIB, p555). It is also the most complex of the prophetic books. Jeremiah, the prophet, was the son of a preacher man, Hilkiyah, who was a priest of the *priests from Anathoth* – in the land of Benjamin, which was in the Southern Kingdom of Judah – just north of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah's priestly family had been displaced years earlier by King Solomon for their opposition to the pretentious self-indulgence, and economic and military policies of the those with power (workingpreacher.org, Alphonetta Wines).

Jeremiah's prophetic career began in a time of hopefulness when the beloved king, Josiah, was leading the people back to their fundamental covenant with Yahweh. And his prophetic career ended when Judah, which included Jerusalem, was taken into exile by Babylon causing the people to move into hopelessness. Bearing witness to three military invasions from Babylon, Jeremiah saw the nation move from prosperity to devastation, from community to exile, from hope to despair. The great crises of Israel's history in the Old Testament involved the destruction of the Temple, which was the dwelling place of God, and the exile of the people. If you read nothing else, read chapter 52 to understand what happened to Israel.

The Book of Jeremiah can be painful and difficult to read, as it reenacts the traumatic violence of war and exile. The grief experienced among the people, including the prophet, is palpable. In the midst of life as they know it, the prophet

Jeremiah offers some harsh words of indictment – as well as some words of hope and forgiveness. It is important to remember the setting of persistent dishonesty and idolatry into which Jeremiah speaks both harsh and hopeful words (all the rest, Preacher's Handbook, 147 & 148) then and now. Today's scripture reading starts at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah with God calling Jeremiah as a prophet. Before turning to God's word for us today, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God from the Prophet **Jeremiah 1:4-10. READ.**

I remember her quiet demeanor in our group. It seemed as if everyone else had something to say except for Elizabeth. I wouldn't have found this odd but for the fact that this group was called the Jeremiah Project- a group at a Christian Youth Conference for HS juniors and seniors who were exploring ministry as a possible vocation. This Project, which is based on today's text in Jeremiah, requires an application process and that those selected be willing to lead worship. Rarely would I call the youth in this group shy or hesitant, but Elizabeth was different. As the facilitator, I wanted to make sure that everyone got a chance to participate. I asked Elizabeth to hang around after our meeting was over, and I checked in with her and asked if everything was ok. She gave a list of reasons why she didn't want to lead worship. She said, "I don't know what to say." "I am really short and would have to stand on a box at the pulpit." "I'm a soft speaker." "I don't read well." "I'm not as smart as the others." "My youth leader from my church made me sign up for this group." **Excuses, excuses!** I told Elizabeth she wasn't alone in her excuses. If we're honest with ourselves, most of us have made a good many excuses in our lifetime and still make them today. I know I have- like "I'm not academic enough to be a minister" or "I don't have my stuff together to be an

effective leader.” Some excuses have a lot of truth to them and some are made because we don’t want to be bothered or we flat out don’t want to do something. And some excuses- the type that Elizabeth was making fall into the category of a deeper root cause...FEAR. Elizabeth was afraid. She was afraid that she wasn’t enough...that she would mess up...that she would be humiliated in front of 1200 of her closest friends. And in her words, she was afraid she’d sound like a hillbilly.

Jeremiah makes similar excuses to God. Like Moses, Jeremiah struggled a lot with God’s call on his life, reminding us that there’s no divine call without conflict and a litany of fears: lack of confidence and experience, fear of rejection, insecurities, you name it. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah with a very affirming and intimidating message- Yes, God has created and known him, and has made him a prophet. But Jeremiah offers his excuses anyway. “I don’t know how to speak. I’m too young.” Scripture tells us he is only a child- a boy- a youth. Heck- he probably hasn’t had the time to discover what his gifts are. Nevertheless, God has equipped him. But how is Jeremiah supposed to know that? God says Jeremiah’s youth is no excuse and neither are his words. But can’t you see- charged with such a large task of speaking God’s words- it would be only natural to protest. Yet, wherever God sends him and whatever God says, Jeremiah goes and says. God is the initiator. **The Lord calls Jeremiah, the excuses are made and then the Lord puts his words in Jeremiah’s mouth saying, “This day I appoint you over nations and empires to dig up, pull down, destroy, demolish, build and plant.”** Most of us would run away after hearing this challenging, prophetic mission but Jeremiah, though he makes his excuses, sticks around to see if God really knows him...if God really has appointed him. God tells Jeremiah to not be afraid...that

He is with him. Jeremiah trusts God enough- even with a difficult mission- even with his excuses- to participate in what God is doing- popular or not. Maybe because Jeremiah realized that his life “was something bigger than himself, something bigger than his own desires; it was about God’s work” (Shifferdecker)?

Sometimes we have to ask ourselves, “What is our discomfort with what is going on?” “Where do we too easily become defensive?” “What are our excuses?” In what ways are our excuses getting in the way of God’s work in this world? As we’ve heard and seen in the Bible, God often calls the most unlikely people at the most unlikely times to bring about God’s kingdom here on earth. A friend sent me a meme the other day that reads, “When God put a calling on your life, God already factored in your stupidity.” The truth of the matter is that God chooses a lot of folks that we’d never allow to make the cut, if it were up to us. Let’s face it- Christians can be Christians’ worst critics. Thank God it’s not up to us who God appoints- and I’m not just talking about ministers! What story are you telling yourself- telling God- that you can’t do? Or what excuses are you making for others because you’re uncomfortable with what change and justice may bring? Our comfortable system or order will no longer work for us. It may sound like this: She’s too young to be on City Council. He’s too dirty to get a job. We’re a high end store and won’t be catering to your people. He’s too old to be an effective teacher...there’s no way young people would relate to him! **Excuses, excuses!**

God calls Jeremiah to a life full of purpose and meaning saying- “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” (v.5). God, who knows Jeremiah before

he is born, calls him to a life lived for the sake of God's mission in the world. And God gives Jeremiah something more than just an exhortation about perseverance; he promises him divine presence. Now while we aren't Jeremiah, the prophet's call story can certainly shed some light on our own vocations or calls to discipleship. We're all created and known by God, each with different God-given gifts. In other words, "we are known before we know, and we enter a world that we didn't create" (Shifferdecker). We're all equipped, appointed and called by God in unique ways. Yet, we are pros in "pleading inadequacy in order to avoid living at the best that God calls us to" (Eugene Peterson, *Run With The Horses*). Like Moses and Jeremiah, many of us struggle to know our call or if we think we know it, to accept it. There's a quote that's often credited to Nelson Mandela, but I don't know who said it originally. The quote is "There is no passion to be found playing small- in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living." You see "there is an enormous gap between what we think we can do and what God calls us to do. Our ideas of what we can do or want to do are trivial; God's ideas for us are grand. The excuses we make are plausible; often they are statements of fact, but they are excuses all the same and are disallowed by our Lord" (Peterson).

As followers of Jesus...we are responding to God's call on our lives. And many times, the word of the Lord can be scary and challenging, and it can also be liberating. Jeremiah is called to speak an uncomfortable and dangerous word- a word that calls people to account- during a time of political and religious turbulence. This is what God meant by the six verbs he gave Jeremiah- four verbs of destruction and two verbs of restoration: pluck up, pull down, destroy,

overthrow, and build and plant (v.10). Even with the excuses made, Jeremiah is faithful and speaks the word that God puts in his mouth to speak, thus learning to acknowledge rather than to deny or even to overcome his many inadequacies. “Jeremiah’s calling echoes the story line of Moses, and is in turn echoed by that of Jesus. To speak prophetically is to follow God into a calling one would not necessarily have chosen, saying and doing things that anger one’s own neighbors, things that, though supported by God, will only be seen as fruitful later on, following trials and tribulations. No wonder Moses and Jeremiah hesitated” (workingpreacher.org, Patricia Hull). In reading about Jeremiah’s journey as a prophet, we’re painfully reminded that God’s call on our lives may cost us everything we hold dear. “Jesus speaks of the same uncomfortable truth: ‘Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matt. 10:39)” (Shifferdecker).

Who or what gets us over our excuses (and the fear and shame)? In today’s biblical story it’s the touch of God. Things start to happen when God puts God’s hands on you! Jeremiah’s lips hold God’s words because God chose Jeremiah to serve as his prophet. Jeremiah didn’t ask for this task; nevertheless, he trusted God to do God’s thing through him. You see “awareness and trust in God’s presence is what drives out fear and brings deliverance” (FOW, Birch, p. 369).

Despite our excuses, may we never forget the shock and power of God’s touch, God’s words and call upon our lives. May we see the light trusting that God renders every perceived inadequacy- every excuse- irrelevant and calls us to live lives of purpose and meaning in a world where too many people settle for so

much less. If you aren't sure of God's call on your life... one challenging call that we all share in common is to love God and one another. So let's live our lives as the people of God trusting God to give us what we need for the journey. Amen.