

The Call of Jeremiah - Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me, 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”

Then I said, ‘ Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy’

But God said to me: “Do not say ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you

And you shall speak whatever I command you

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you, to deliver you, says the Lord.”

Then the Lord put out a hand, and touched my mouth, and God said to me

“Now I have put my words in your mouth,

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,

To pluck up and to pull down to destroy and to overthrow To build and to plant.”

Isn't that beautiful? BEAUTIFUL. The words themselves are like a call. Hear them once again. (Read the text aloud again)

Part of me wants to simply be quiet in the face of this....and let the sound of it do what the sound of holy words does. I want these words to echo off the insides of me....reverberate in my eardrums and in my ribcage where my heart lies protected...I want the sound waves of this poetry to bounce from the beams of this ceiling, ricochet from wall to wall in here....the ripples of words so ancient, passing through our own bodies, and leaving a steaming, streaming trail, like a comet, and lodging there, inside us, kindling there a flame of passion, and purpose, and unspeakable hope.

These words *live*. They breathe; they sing and dance, in fact and jump around on the page....like kids on a bed, they are not concerned with what is proper or what you expected them to do. They are alive and jumping; and eventually bounce right off, into the air, into the world.

They are as alive now as when Jeremiah spoke them and Baruch wrote them down - As powerful as when the people heard them first and discovered in them the very call of the Holy One calling them to faithfulness and courage and hope.

The call of the Holy One, when it comes to a person, or a people – is like that. Let it be so for us today.

First, I want to look at this passage to see what exciting things we can find historically and linguistically – that will give us a good grounding to then ask what is the Word here for us today.

So walk with me through a few of the riches we find when we consult the commentaries:

Jeremiah was a prophet living in Judah just before its fall to Babylonian troops. His writings, scholars believe, were collected and written by a professional scribe named Baruch. Jeremiah has been called the weeping prophet because so much of his book is painful to read; he is called to speak to the people and predict what is going to happen to them immanently. Their country is about to be destroyed. It doesn't take a political scientist to figure out that Babylon is getting ready to invade. Prophets had been saying that for years, and a series of ineffective kings had made things worse: tried to make alliances, and had done everything they could think of to fend off the country's demise. Everything, that is, except to turn back to the covenant; to the truth of God's way. At least that's how the prophets saw things. The prophets spoke with almost one voice in saying that ruin was coming - because, the prophets, believed, the kings and the people had abandoned the ways of God.

However we understand their analysis, whether we agree or not with their understanding of God and God's ways, they were right in predicting tragedy for the country.

If there had been a doomsday clock in those days, prophets like Amos and Hosea would have been speaking at a quarter to twelve, first Isaiah at five minutes to midnight. But Jeremiah? Jeremiah's voice came at one minute to midnight and counting. It was about to happen... the enemy was right at the door. By the time of his call and prophesy, it was about to happen, and it did. A more modern comparison might be to think of France, as the Nazis are gathering at the border. And to follow that analogy, once they're in, once the country has fallen and the goose step is heard in your own back yard, the stomping and clomping of enemy boots on the cobblestones that once were your own, enemy soliders marching and chanting their victory in the streets, ripping down signs in your own language to put up their own, coming into the churches, spitting on the communion table...desecrating your holy places....That's something like what happened. Many voices rose in protest, and many people dragged off to concentration camps for their efforts. Jeremiah is the one to be taken to the concentration camps with those who resisted.

And so the Babylonians did invade. They captured the trades people and intellectuals and anyone who might be useful to them, put them in shackles and marched them off to Babylon, into captivity. Jeremiah was taken as well. Jeremiah the prophet, called to bear in his own body and soul the pain of his people. First by calling to them and warning them even though he knew they would not listen, then finally, going with them in their brokenness and everything that went along with it: the intensity of feeling: just back to our example of France - there had been French collaborators, those who betrayed their own people for fear, for pay, for bread for their children, for their lives....and then followed the resulting grief and guilt and multilayered response of a broken people. That's how real invasion works, right? You turn the people against one another. You manipulate their desperation and the brokenness already there, and let it run its course and the people will turn on each other and then - you've won.

The people turn against one another, they believe that God has forsaken them, they doubt that God ever existed, or that life has meaning, or that anything means anything at all.

Jeremiah is a prophet for times like that. His pain for his people is immense. He holds them in his heart, he speaks a word of warning and ultimately of hope to a people who have lost faith in God and in one another.

READ IT AGAIN

A couple more notes: First, we see here a very advanced concept of the individual. In some ways this is astounding, because middle eastern society at that time, and to some extent now, is based very much on the collective as the main source of identity. In that place and time, you are who you are because you are part of a particular tribe or clan or people. That is your main identity. So many names identify you: I would be not just Bev but Beverly, daughter of Bill and Gertie, granddaughter of Mabel and Ed Saville. I would have no identity apart from that. (This incidentally is why the concept of shame is so powerful....because when you act in a way that is not right, you bring shame on your whole group not just on yourself) And so, in a society like that, an individual, a prophet, called to speak against the society – this is quite a thing – can you see that? That truth would be held not in the group but in an individual’s mind and heart against the group.....

But it goes deeper than that, because Israel as a nation was different in some ways from its surrounding nations. When it moved to monarchy, it did everything that could be done to make sure that the king (or queen) would not have ultimate power. It set up a system whereby the king and the royal court would be held accountable in the same way as the common people – how? By the role of a prophet. A prophet who was housed at the court and whose sole job was to keep the king in line. While in other countries, the king’s word WAS the word of God, in Israel, the court prophet was called to say to the king “thus saith the Lord” and that trumped any king’s power or word. God was and is the only real and the final power in the land of Israel. That’s what prophesy is about.

THEN THE LORD PUT OUT A HAND AND TOUCHED MY MOUTH; AND SAID TO ME....NOW I HAVE PUT MY WORDS IN YOUR MOUTH.

The commentaries say that the verb “touch” is a pretty strong verb. Not a gentle caress but the kind of verb that would make those who heard Jeremiah say “then God touched my mouth” - they’d say “wow that must have hurt” – it’s that kind of word. Then God reached out a hand and *touch*ed my mouth.

This is a very strong, very intimate and physical an understanding of God’s call. Other prophets report visions – Moses and the burning bush, Isaiah and the 6 winged seraphs...for Jeremiah, only a voice, and a touch. And for him, it was enough.

Finally - there is the word nations. This is extremely important.

TODAY, I APPOINT YOU OVER NATIONS AND KINGDOMS, TO PLUCK UP AND PULL DOWN; TO BUILD AND TO PLANT

“The Nations” is an expression in the Hebrew Scriptures that means outsiders, foreigners, often used as a word for the enemy. Jeremiah’s call is to speak to the nations. This, at a time when his country is being invaded, when there will be extreme fear, high nationalism and paranoia about any foreign countries,

the call is to speak to the nations. This challenges, denies and smashes narrow nationalism even at times of foreign threat and war.

So – in all this, what is the Word for us today?

We do not live in times like those of this prophet. We don't know; simply do not know what it's like to live on the brink of a national disaster of this magnitude – an invasion that will slaughter many and drive others into an empty exile of the body and soul. This kind of thing goes on every day in our world; but our own country and continent have not had that experience. We can imagine, we can read about it or even visit war torn, invaded and broken countries, but we don't know that experience in our bones; in our common soul.

We do know, however, what it is like to live on a personal precipice. To know something horrible is coming; to go through the convulsing emotion of a change so devastating in our lives that it leaves us breathless and without faith. We do know what it's like to feel the very ground pulled out from under us and to scream, either aloud or into a midnight pillow 'WHYYYYY?'

Yes, we do know that.

And - we know what it is to feel called like this - To feel such pain for the world, to ache in our guts and cry in helpless anguish for the victims of a world gone mad. To feel the call from a compassionate and hurting God, to hold the pain, to bear it in the name of truth.

The call, however, is not to passive pain bearing – as powerful and authentic as that is. The call to bear the pain of the world is also a call to action – the Word of the Lord – the word meaning WORD (Hebrew "dabar") means not only Word, but the presence, the activity, the energy and intent of God. Later in his book he will describe it as a burning in his belly. He experiences the Word of God as a compelling force....

When the Word of God comes to a person, to a people, that Word is a call to action. Jeremiah is called to bear the pain of his people, and also to ...well...how does the poetry go?

TODAY, I APPOINT YOU OVER NATIONS AND KINGDOMS, TO PLUCK UP AND TO PULL DOWN; DESTROY AND OVERTHROW; TO BUILD AND TO PLANT

We know that call as well; there are things that need to be plucked up and pulled down; destroyed and overthrown. What those things are in the places your heart dwells – I don't know. I know some of them in my own life, and I know some of them in our common life on this planet. There is much that must be destroyed and overthrown. And there is much building and planting to do as well. This is holy work; the call to a people with ears and hearts open for the moving of the Spirit. Dangerous, holy work. What but the fire in our bellies, the call and Word of God, could empower us to do that?

For his trouble Jeremiah was abandoned and rejected by his own people; he suffers with them and for them and he suffers because of them.

This is Jeremiah. This is the young man who heard the voice of God and acted on it for the rest of his life. His call is vibrant and vital – and even though he doesn't write about his own inner motivation, it seems to me that at the worst times, when he wondered if it was worth it, he was drawn again to the call; to the words of God grounding him and holding him when all else would fall away, even his own belief that the call was true.

Read Text one more time.

May you be open to the call of the Holy One – May you bear the pain you are called upon to bear for this world, may you know when it is right to pluck up and pull down. May you have wisdom to see what must be destroyed and overthrown; may you have courage and stamina to build and plant when the season is ripe.

In all of this my most fervent prayer is that you will know the call of God who knows you intimately, since before the world began, and will be with you always.

Amen.