

“Journeying with Jeremiah, Part I: The Call”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 21st 2016 (14th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 1: 1-10

Those of you who grew up in the United Church of Canada (which is to say, just about anyone who had experience in the United Church prior to the 1970s) will be aware that the use of a common lectionary to guide the choice of Sunday scripture passages, was not something commonly found in our denomination. It was only starting in the 70s—the same decade that gave birth to the Nanaimo Ecumenical Centre—in which improved ecumenical relationships between the Roman Catholic church (which had recently revised **its** lectionary of scripture readings) and many Reformed Churches such as the United Church (denominations which previously had not tended to make use of a lectionary) led to a consultation on texts, followed by what came to be known—in the 1980s—as the Common Lectionary, followed in 1994 by what came to be known as the **Revised** Common Lectionary: which the United Church currently commends, but does not mandate, for use by congregations. In other words: unlike our Anglican or Catholic sisters and brothers, we are free to use the Sunday by Sunday list of Scripture readings found in the lectionary (which we at Trinity do some of the time) or ignore that list and head in a different direction (which we at Trinity do at other times). At any rate!

Receive all that info as a prelude to the fact that in 1994—when the Revised Common Lectionary appeared—one of the big changes that took effect consisted in the insertion of a significantly larger chunk of passages from the Old Testament book Jeremiah. I can still recall the enthusiasm a handful of colleagues expressed at the fact that during year three of the lectionary’s three year cycle, there would be eight or nine consecutive late summer/early fall weeks in which the Old Testament reading would be drawn either from Jeremiah or from the book Lamentations, traditionally attributed to Jeremiah. Recognizing how appropriate my friends’ enthusiasm was, I must confess that I found myself at the time thinking: “That’s all well and good! But who in their right mind would attempt to preach eight or nine consecutive sermons on Jeremiah?”

Suffice it to say that we now have definitive answer to that question.

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There can be no denying—as I suggested a moment ago—no denying the importance of Jeremiah: neither the man, nor the book that bears his name. Along with Isaiah and Ezekiel, the book Jeremiah is one of the three core books of prophecy found in the Hebrew Bible. While it has fewer chapters than Isaiah, it is actually longer than Isaiah; furthermore, when you consider that Isaiah is

very likely a compilation of **three** different prophets all of whom share a common tradition, the size and scope of the material relating to the **one** prophet Jeremiah is nothing short of staggering. While it is certainly true that the **book** Isaiah figures more prominently in the pages of the New Testament than any other prophetic book (it's not for nothing that Isaiah is sometimes referred to as the "fifth Gospel"), a strong case can be made that the prophetic **figure** who has shaped the New Testament most decisively is none other than Jeremiah: the pages of whose book not only contain stirring prophetic messages, but also autobiographical glimpses that place those prophetic messages into their context. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start with this morning's reading, a reading which—helpfully—permits us to start at the very beginning!

In actual fact...in actual fact this morning's reading includes two separate units from the book's first chapter. The first of these units is best thought of as an inscription: defining the sort of book that this will be.

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

While there is much of interest in that compact paragraph—not least the fact that Jeremiah came from a Priestly family and was no doubt qualified, himself, to serve as a Priest—the especially noteworthy fact here is the sheer length of Jeremiah's ministry. That ministry began during the reign of King Josiah, one of the very few Kings regarded by the Old Testament as having been a good King. If we accept that Josiah was placed on the throne some 640 years before the birth of Christ, and if we accept that Jeremiah received his call in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, it means that Jeremiah was given the start to his ministry in 628/627. At the other end, the fact that his work and witness continued through the eleventh year of the reign of Josiah's son Zedekiah (who was definitely **not** regarded as one of the good kings!) means that Jeremiah prophesized right up to the fall of Jerusalem—at the hands of the Babylonians—in the year 586. And yes: those dates tell us at least two very basic things.

In the first place, they tell us that the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah was an extraordinarily lengthy one: lasting, at a bare minimum, for 40 years. Imagine, if you will, someone who became an advisor to Pierre Elliott Trudeau in the final year of the elder Trudeau's time as Prime Minister. That person—the one who began serving in 1984—would not retire from advising Prime Ministers until 2024, were they to serve in that capacity for as long as Jeremiah served in his capacity as the advisor—and yes, as the conscience and goad—of those ancient Judean kings. In short: Jeremiah served a remarkably long time. But there's more about those dates that needs to be noted at the outset.

The stretch of time, between Jeremiah's call under Josiah and the completion of his ministry under Zedekiah, represents one of the true nightmare eras (perhaps the quintessential nightmare era) in the history of ancient Israel: a time that begins hopefully enough under Josiah, only to be followed by a dreadful period that culminates first in Judah's becoming a vassal of Babylon and then—after an ill-conceived act of defiance—the utter destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple at the hand of Babylon's army. Worth noting therefore, at the outset, is that Jeremiah remained with his people throughout that entire national nightmare: doing so despite the fact that he appears to have been a man of some means, who bore the additional burden of having foreseen the coming destruction. And yet he never attempted to escape...never attempted to abandon his people. As we embark on this journey with Jeremiah, it is crucial to bear that in mind: because while the prophet may often have no choice but to speak harshly to God's people, he always remains in solidarity with God's people. Jeremiah is the ultimate Old Testament exemplar of that tradition of costly solidarity.

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The second half of this morning's reading comprises the call to Jeremiah: a call which, first and foremost, does a terrific job of defining what in the world we are talking about, when we speak of Biblical prophecy.

*Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me: "Behold I have put my words in your mouth." There! Right there, you have the essence of what the Old Testament means when it designates someone as a prophet; it means that they are entitled to use the expression—*Thus saith the LORD*. While it is certainly true that the prophetic witness incorporates important themes, above all the theme that has meant so much to our United Church advocacy for social justice: the fact remains that it is not their passion for justice that defines the prophets, but rather the fact that their passion for justice expresses God's justice, and that the words spoken by the prophet are grounded in God's own word. As we journey with Jeremiah, it will be worth recalling that even the most uncomfortable word he speaks is a word that he does not regard as his own: a fact that led him into situations in which he would often find himself speaking in ways that deeply trouble him.*

*"Behold I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." On the one hand, notice that four of those six verbs involve destruction: *to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow*. On the other hand, notice that the final two of those six verbs involve restoration: *"to build and to plant."* As we get to know Jeremiah better, we'll discover that he did not relish the part of his vocation that involved speaking words of destruction; in actual fact he hated it. Appropriate then, right at the outset, that God informed him—and that Jeremiah informs us—that his call not only **also** includes building and planting...but that at the end of the day...God's*

final word and ultimate purpose (even when plucking up and breaking down, even when destroying and overthrowing) is to arrive at that time when the ground has been prepared yet again for building up...prepared yet again for planting: in the hope of making a new beginning and preparing the reaping of a new harvest. We'll eventually discover the extent to which Jeremiah himself leans on that hope; we needn't be ashamed to ourselves lean on just such a hope, hope in the ultimately gracious purposes of our God, for each and for all.

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A final thought. As we journey with Jeremiah, we will occasionally find ourselves hearing Old Testament themes echoed in the pages of the New Testament. That's certainly true when we speak of Jeremiah's call, both in general terms (the New Testament is filled with dramatic call stories) but also in one specific instance. Remember that Jeremiah's call includes God's stirring assurance: "*before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; and before you were born I consecrated you a prophet to the nations.*" In much the same way, the Apostle Paul tells the Galatians that God had set **him** apart from his mother's womb, clearly echoing Jeremiah. But now here's the thing worth.

Paul—who saw himself as Christ's messenger to the nations—believed, above all else, that Christ's ministry entailed the expansion of God's mission from one people, to all people. For what it's worth, I am convinced that it is through Paul's universalistic understanding of Christ's ministry, that we ourselves are invited to know that we too have been called: not necessarily the Technicolor call of a Jeremiah, but a call that God takes seriously and that we are permitted to take seriously provided we are not seduced into taking ourselves seriously! And yes: like Jeremiah (and like Moses before him) we are likely to respond to God's call by insisting that we are not up to the task. "Little old me? What could God possibly do with the likes of me?" But here's the thing.

I am convinced that if there is anything that displeases God more than our false human pride, it is our false human modesty. Make no mistake about it! With God all things are possible...

...and we are never to sell ourselves short, for the simple reason that anytime we sell ourselves short, what we are actually doing is selling short the loving power of the One who has called us: the God who has promised to equip us for any of the tasks to which God's call has summoned us! In at least that one aspect, our call is not unlike Jeremiah's. For like the ancient prophet, we are called to trust, to obey: and then—in faith—to put one foot in front of the other and simply to follow.

In the name and in the Spirit of the One who has called us: may it be so!
Amen!