

Jeremiah 1:4-10  
I Have Put My Words in Your Mouth  
Hope Christian Reformed Church  
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Three years ago, I spent the summer at Christ Hospital, learning about hospital chaplaincy. I had just one year of seminary under my belt; and there I was, doing everything that a “real” chaplain does:

Visiting folks in their rooms,  
helping people fill out advance directives (medical power of attorney),  
offering care to medical staff,  
meeting paramedics at the door of the emergency room,  
calling violence interruptors,  
calming down tense situations before security got involved,  
sitting with grieving families.

This is the kind of stuff that experienced, capable, maybe even formidable do.

And there *I* was. One of only two people my age. And as young as I could possibly be. (I had gone straight from high school to college to seminary – and they require a minimum of at least one year of seminary before you enter the program.)

Not only was I young; I was also *self-conscious* about being young. And I was self-conscious about the fact that I tend to look even younger than I actually am. (My orthodontist pointed out to me once that the braces don't help!) And all throughout the summer I struggled with thinking:

*I'm an imposter.*  
*I have no idea what I'm doing.*  
*The hospital staff must think I'm a joke, and invading their space.*

Nobody actually said those things to me. But one time I was making a visit to a new patient on my floor. So, I knocked on his door, walked in, and introduced myself saying, “Hi; I'm Chaplain Erin.” And I'll never forget what he said to me. He said, “Who did you say you are?” And I said, “Chaplain Erin.” And he said, “You must be a candy-striper chaplain!”

Sometimes, your age (and sometimes even the age you *look*), can make you feel inadequate for the task you're called to.

And here in our passage this morning, God calls Jeremiah to a task that he feels inadequate for.

And part of it may indeed have to do with his age. The LORD tells Jeremiah, “I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” *You* need to speak *my words* to the whole world.

And Jeremiah says, “LORD, I don't know how to speak; I am only a child!”

Bible scholars aren't sure how old Jeremiah was when he was called. Some think that he could have been as old as twenty-five or thirty. But others think that – if you work all the dates out – it makes the most sense to understand Jeremiah receiving his call as a teenager, somewhere between thirteen and eighteen years old.

(How many of you are thirteen to eighteen years old? How many of you *remember* being thirteen to eighteen?)

And Jeremiah says to the LORD, “But I don't know how to speak!”

What kind of natural ability did Jeremiah have? Was he a confident speaker at all?  
(And remember, God never historically gets very concerned about people's natural abilities...)

And probably, Jeremiah didn't have much training in this area, either.

For one thing, he's probably young.

But for another thing, according to the family he was born into, he was meant for a different occupation. Look at 1:1: “The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, *one of the priests* at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin.” Jeremiah is meant to be a priest!

The priest's job is to wear special robes and turbans, and to spend their days in the sanctuary of the temple, and to represent the people to God. When people come to offer sacrifices, priests are supposed to get a portion of it. Priests live on land that's specially set apart for them. It's a job with benefits!

But here, the LORD is calling Jeremiah to be a prophet!

Instead of wearing beautiful uniforms, prophets' clothes tended to be shabby, and sometimes – when they were really supposed to make a point – even crazy.

Instead of representing the people to God, the prophet's job was to represent *God* to the *people*!  
Instead of working in the sanctuary of the temple, prophets went out to the streets!

And you know what? It is *not* a popular job to speak God's words to people, because often, God says things that people do *not* want to hear. (And historically, God doesn't have a problem speaking up, whether or not his people want to listen.) And if you're speaking the LORD's words to people who don't really love the LORD (and who maybe even hate him), they will have no problem hating you, too.

And whether or not Jeremiah is able to grasp all this at the outset, the LORD certainly knows. Do you know what his first words of “comfort” to Jeremiah are? “You'll go wherever I tell you to go, and say whatever I tell you to say...and *do not be afraid of them*”! Apparently God knows that there are people out there to be afraid of!

And the LORD isn't just calling Jeremiah to be a local, neighborhood prophet (though even that would have been hard enough). He says to Jeremiah, “You must go wherever I tell you to go, and say whatever I tell you to say. *Today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms.*”

And as far as the content of Jeremiah's message: God is calling him to speak to God's people in Judah, and all sorts of other powerful (and sometimes brutal) nations surrounding them. And these are people who have mostly turned completely away from the LORD. And God tells Jeremiah, “I have appointed you to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Did you catch that? Uproot and tear down. Destroy and overthrow.

Build and plant.

Jeremiah first needs to preach the bad news that God is going to destroy his people's rebellion. And, as

far as the message Jeremiah is called to bring, there is twice as much bad news as there is good news.

And, to give you an overview of how Jeremiah's story turns out, Jeremiah is obedient to the LORD's call. He does preach God's message to the people. And it's a message that says, "The LORD is not going to stand your rebellion anymore. If you give all your rebellion up, the LORD will receive you and forgive you, because he does *not* delight in the pain of his people. But if you *refuse* to return to him, the LORD is going to wipe out this nation, and carry you into exile, and some of you will be killed, and others will be enslaved."

And for all of Jeremiah's preaching, and for all of his hard work...the people don't listen. They call Jeremiah a liar, and they plot to kill him, and he wants to quit...and nobody listens. So Jeremiah witnesses his people being carried off into exile; he witnesses the temple in Jerusalem being completely destroyed; and he experiences so much sadness. (Jeremiah's nickname comes to be the Weeping Prophet.)

So here, at the beginning, no wonder Jeremiah feels inadequate for this task. Whether or not he's capable of foreseeing any of this:

he's young,  
he's inexperienced,  
and the call the LORD has given him is *hard*.

Now. At this point, let's all take a deep breath and a nice, big sigh of relief.

We live in the age of the Gospel. We're under a new covenant now. We've been bought with the blood of Jesus, and our righteousness is in Christ. I'm not going to say anything for sure, but we probably don't have to worry about God destroying temples and carrying his chosen nation into exile.

But. For those of us who are in Christ, we are *all* chosen by God to be prophets, and called by God to be his messengers. This is why:

Christ is the living Son of God, true God and true human. And more than anyone else, Jesus speaks to the people on behalf of the Father. But when Jesus rose from the dead he said to his disciples – and he says to *us*, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."<sup>1</sup>

So then, how many of us here belong to Christ?

Then you're a prophet. You're a messenger of God Almighty.

The LORD has called *you* to speak to the world on his behalf.

Some of you prophets this morning are young. Younger than thirteen, even.

Some of you are inexperienced. Maybe even new to the faith.

Some of you have received *no* formal training: neither in speaking nor in theology.

Some of you don't have much natural ability.

But the LORD *knows* you. And you know him.

And the task is beautiful, but also hard.

The news that we're called to bring is good. The only *real* good news that there is in this world.

But just because the news is good, it doesn't mean that it's going to be popular.

Jesus is the one who saves. But he's also a stumbling block for those who don't believe.

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:21

To those of us who are being saved, we know the cross is the power of God.

But the cross is foolishness for those who don't want to listen.

We live in a world that lies. And God is calling *you* to go out and tell the truth.

The task is a beautiful one, but it's not easy.

And if you feel inadequate – if you feel it's too big for you – then you're on to something.

Because it is. It *is* too big...for us.

But even though God has appointed us to be messengers, it's not ultimately *our* job. It's *God's* job.

See, the task God called Jeremiah to was *God's* task.

The message Jeremiah preached was *God's* message.

God didn't call Jeremiah to speak his words because he wanted to talk about judgment and destruction. God sends Jeremiah because, through him, God wants to *save*.

If God didn't care about the world, he wouldn't send a prophet to the world.

The LORD sends Jeremiah because the LORD is reaching out to his people, all over the world...to save them.

And that's the message of the Gospel: “God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”<sup>2</sup>

And it's *God's* job to bring that word to the world. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, he chooses to do that *through* his people. Through us.

God is fully aware of the messengers he sends. He formed us, and knows us, and set us apart, and appointed us to this task.

And by the Holy Spirit, it is *God* who works through us.

We speak the words *God* puts in our mouth.

We tell the story *God* has done in our lives.

We share the good news of the Gospel, which *God* has rooted in our hearts.

The Holy Spirit may work through us like he works through a church I know in Paterson, New Jersey. The population is dense, the people there are poor, and the violence is bad.

Every week, a group of people get together, put on these bright orange t-shirts that say, on the back, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and they walk through the neighborhood. They stop and talk to people who are sitting on their front porches, and they walk into local businesses, and they say, “Can we pray for you?”

This church has become such a presence in the community that, when they see the people with their bright orange t-shirts, even hardened gang members will approach the team and say, “Hey, will you pray for me?” And right there, they stop and pray.

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<sup>2</sup> John 3:16, 17

A group in Roseland is doing something similar.

They're prophets. And God is reaching out to his runaway daughters and sons through them.

Through their presence and through their prayers, they preach that the power of Christ is stronger than violence.

That love is stronger than hatred.

That new life can come even out of dead ends.

That Jesus brings hope to the hopeless.

And that no one – *no one!* - is beyond the saving reach of God.

Being a prophet could look different. It could look like my friend, Chris, who is only about forty years old, and struggling badly with arthritis. She lives in chronic pain.

But Chris knows Jesus well. And she prays. And the Holy Spirit makes her heart sensitive to the needs of others. So she writes cards, which always tend to say exactly what people need to hear. She orders books for people – which also tend to be exactly what they need. If you ever talk with Chris, she'll tell you about the goodness God has shown her, all throughout her life. She'll tell you her story of how God, mysteriously, gives her a peace that passes all understanding. And she will make sure you don't walk away without knowing that God loves you, and wants you, and treasures you.

Chris is a prophet.

And even here, people of God, the LORD has filled this room full of prophets. Some of us are pastors. Others of us are parents. Some of us are long retired. Some of us are little children. But the LORD has put his Holy Spirit in each one of us. And through the places that you work, through the places you go to school, through the people you spend time with, God reaches into even the corners and cracks and crevices of the world through you.

What does it look like to be a prophet?

Maybe it's as simple as telling your story...telling about how God's grace in your life.

Maybe it's as difficult as standing up for justice and peace in places where there is no justice and peace.

Telling truth in a place that lies.

It could be hard. And maybe you'll get nervous.

But God goes with you.

And the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say.

And he will call his sons and daughters back home...through you.

Even inexperienced. Even young. Even old. Through *you*.

He says to each one of us:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

before you were born I set you apart;

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

And if you're sitting here this morning and don't know this God, but you hear him calling you – stick close to these prophets around you. Ask to hear their story. Listen. Listen to the God who is alive in them and speaks through them. Listen to the God who wants you...and is calling you by name.

Whoever we are, God will take us exactly as we are.

In his hands, he'll make us exactly who we're supposed to be. (And even in our ordinariness, the strength and beauty he gives us may surprise us.)

And, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God will work in the world through you.

Amen?

Thanks be to God!