

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Jeremiah 31:7-14

“He who scattered Israel will gather him and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.”

(Jeremiah 31:10 N.R.S.V.)

Jeremiah

“But I am only a boy.” That was what I said when God called me to be a prophet. Looking back now, I am a bit embarrassed at my response. After all I was well versed in the history of God’s dealing with his people. My father, Hilkiah was a priest and he spent hours teaching me about God. So I knew, for example, the story of Samuel.

If you remember, Samuel was a very young boy living in the temple with the old priest Eli when God first spoke to him. Samuel was so young and clueless that he didn’t recognize God’s voice. God called to him when he was sleeping. “Samuel, Samuel.” Samuel thought it was old Eli who was calling him. So he went into Eli’s room and asked him what he wanted.

Eli said, go back to bed, I didn’t call you. This happened a second time and then a third time. Finally, Eli caught on and told Samuel that God was calling him. He told him that when God called him again he was to say, “speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” So that is what Samuel did and he received his first of many messages from God. Samuel was a great prophet of God.

As I say, I knew the stories about Samuel and David, and so many other unlikely people that God called and used in powerful ways. Still, I guess I had this image in my mind that prophets were old men with long beards. I just couldn’t image God calling me to be a prophet.

So I said, “But, God, I am only a boy.”

God shook his head. He said, “Why is it with you mortals and this ‘only’ stuff? It is always, ‘I’m only a boy.’ Or ‘I’m only an old woman.’ or ‘I’m only one person.’ As if that was what really counted. Let me tell you, mortal, what does count. I am the only one here who is God. I am the only one here who makes no mistakes. Did you really think that I meant to call your father, Hilkiah and that somehow I miss dialed and got his son, Jeremiah by mistake? Is that what you think, mortal?”

I should have been terrified, but somehow the whole idea of God somehow calling up the wrong person and being surprised by who showed up, struck me as funny. “No,” I managed, “I guess not.”

God was not physically present, but I somehow felt the pressure of his hand on my shoulder. “So what is the problem, then?” he asked.

“I’m scared,” I admitted. “I’m afraid that I will let you down, that I won’t be able to do what you want me to do.”

“Ah,” said God, “You know that you aren’t in this by yourself, don’t you? I will be with you. Stop looking at your weakness and look at my strength. Stop looking at your imperfections and see my perfection. Stop focusing on what you don’t know and look at what I do know. I will make this possible. Where I sent you, you will go. The words that I give you to speak, you will speak. Trust me on this, I got this.”

So I did just that. I trusted God. And it is a good thing that God had my back, because the things that God wanted me to say were not the things that people wanted to hear.

Let me stop here for a moment and give you some background. After the reign of King Solomon the nation of Israel split in two, north and south. Both kingdoms were ruled by a series of bad kings that led to disaster. I lived in the so called southern kingdom of Judah around the turn of the six century B.C. The Northern kingdom had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and they were absorbed into that empire. The Southern Kingdom had become a vassal state first of the Assyrians and then later of the Babylonians.

Vassal states were allowed to rule themselves but were required to pay heavy tribute to the empire. No body likes to pay tribute so vassal states were always trying to break free. Judah was no exception. At least three times Judah withheld tribute and tried to break free of the empires. Each time the situation got worse instead of better.

Things finally came to a head in the early part of the sixth century B.C. Judah’s king at the time was a man named Zedekiah. Zedekiah was friendly toward me, but he was a weak king. He was only allowed to come to the throne because he had the backing of King Nebuchadrezzar, of the Babylonian Empire. So that made him suspect to the pro-independence minded princes of Judah. The princes had the real power and they kept pushing for revolt.

So here is where I come in. The word that God gave to me was that the revolt would not succeed. God’s word was that the people of Judah had brought this on themselves with their whoring after other gods and with their cheating, and abuse of the poor and the powerless. That was not what the princes of Judah wanted to hear.

There were other prophets in the land, though they were not truly prophets of God. These other prophets were all too glad to tell the princes of Judah what they wanted to hear. They told them that because the temple of God was in Jerusalem, they were safe. God would protect them. They told them that God would fight for them and that the yoke of the Babylonians would be thrown off.

It was my job to call out these false prophets for what they were. I told everyone who would listen, including the king that their only hope was to repent and truly turn back to God. Zedekiah tried to get them to listen. At one point he convinced the rich to free their slaves. It was against the law of God for them to have slaves, especially to have made slaves of their fellow Jews. But selfishly, they did it anyway.

So for a brief period, I had hope. But then they took back their slaves and went back to living just as greedy and corrupted as they always had. They said, God will understand. This is just business, it is the way things are done. There is nothing wrong with what we are doing. They found it easier to believe what they wanted to be true instead of what God was really saying. Well, they may have fooled themselves, but God was not fooled. God knew their hearts.

This was a rough time for me, I have to say. I was accused of being unpatriotic, of being against God, of trying to bring about Judah's downfall. I was beaten and thrown into prison more than once. The king tried to protect me, but there was only so much he could do.

The people persisted in their wickedness. They trusted in their own strength and goodness, in the temple, in everything except God. So the consequences that I had prophesied came about. In 587 B.C. the city of Jerusalem was sacked, and the cream of the citizens were carried away into Babylonian captivity. It broke my heart and it broke God's heart as well.

God gave me these words to say, "Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?" "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!" It is important that you understand that while God allows these things to happen, God takes no delight in them. God's words are the words of a lover who has been betrayed, who wants nothing more than to be restored to right relationship.

For the people of that time, this seemed like the end of the story. Their nation was no more. Their city was destroyed. They had lost everything.

It seemed like the end of the story, but it was not. Before the final attack came, I made a public show of buying a piece of land from my kinsman. It was a piece of land that the enemy army was camped upon. Most people would have thought that I was throwing my money away. But I wanted them to know, that the land would be valuable again. This was not the end of the story. God would redeem his people.

In time God did redeem his people and brought them back from captivity to dwell once more in the land of Judah. Not only that, but as you know, in Jesus Christ, God has redeemed us once and for all time from sin.

So that's my story. What is yours? When God calls you, how will you answer. Will you say, "I'm only," or will you say, "I am yours."

When God warns, will you listen? Or will you declare it fake news and believe in your own righteousness?

I beg of you, please don't break God's loving heart. I invite you now to join me in silent prayer as we listen for what God is saying today. Amen.