**The Book of Jeremiah: *To Tear Down, To Build Up***

**Sunday May 16, 2021**

**“The Call of the Prophet” (Jeremiah 1:4-19)**

The opening verses of the book of Jeremiah act as a historical preface to the entire book (1:1-3). Not only do they introduce us to the main character, Jeremiah, but they also set God’s message within a clear historical context with an explicit chronology. The *word of the Lord* came to Jeremiah during the reigns of these particular kings of Judah – Josiah (626-609 B.C.), Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.) and Zedekiah (598-587 B.C.). The word of the Lord came through the prophet and it greatly impacted the worldly powers, namely, the royal rule of these kings. So, there is another, greater power at work in the world that supersedes even the best-laid schemes of mice and men. This opening preface ends with a note of foreboding that that points the final outcome of this grand drama. Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry will continue “down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, *when the people of Jerusalem went into exile*” (1:3). The *exile* or the *captivity* referred to here was the Babylonian conquest. In 587 B.C. this imperialistic superpower swept into the land, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and displaced its citizens into exile. For a people who were convinced that God was on their side, this was a horribly traumatic event. The book of Jeremiah is reflective and responsive to this historical crisis that shook the nation to its core.

The chapter moves on to depict the call of the prophet (1:4-10). Like many people in the Bible who were called by God, Jeremiah was a bit resistant to the divine summons. Even though God always encourages the people he calls, they frequently become fixated on the magnitude of the task and their own inadequacies. “*I can’t do this. You’ve got the wrong person*,” tends to be the typical response when God asks people to do something. Yet, with beautiful words of encouragement, God declared that he had had his hand on Jeremiah since birth, setting him apart for this important job (1:5). The assurance that he was divinely chosen, equipped and prepared for this mission, should have been enough to convince Jeremiah to step up to the plate. But the enormity of it all frightened him.

The Lord said to Jeremiah, “*Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations*.” Jeremiah knew that speaking the word of the Lord was no easy task, especially on such a universal stage! No wonder he hesitated and protested God’s call, citing his young age as the chief disqualification. “*I can’t speak for you!”* he said, *“I’m too young*!” (1:6). But God replied, “*Don’t use that as an excuse. Just go where I send you and I’ll give you the words to say.”* Like Jeremiah, we tend to come up with all kinds of excuses when God asks us to do something. But God always addresses our hesitations with the promise to give us what we need to get the job done. Jeremiah doubted in his ability to speak for God, so God promised to supply him with the words to say. We simply need to step out in faith, get on the road and take the first steps toward our destination. God promises to support and strengthen us when we obey his call.

When we’re fearful of the many challenges that lie ahead, God comes to us and speaks words of assurance, “*Don’t be afraid for I am with you”* (1:8). God’s strengthening presence helps us through the most difficult of circumstances. Jeremiah’s hesitations about being God’s prophet emerged from his very real fears about the opposition he would face. The powerful of the land, the kings, princes, and priests, were poised to fight against him (1:18-19). Yet God calmed his fears, declaring, “They will fight you, but they will fail. *For I am with you, and I will take care of you*. I, the Lord, have spoken!” (1:19). God did not promise Jeremiah that his prophetic ministry would be free from opposition, danger or difficulty. But he did guarantee his presence and protection in the face of these very real threats. The road ahead for Jeremiah contained many perils that would push him to his limits, but he would survive because God was with him. Our God still speaks these comforting words to his people whenever they are anxious about the challenges of God’s mission. The work of God’s kingdom is not free from opposition and difficulty, so there is good reason to be a bit apprehensive about the road ahead. Yet, God speaks to our fears and reassures us that no matter what, “*I am with you and I will take care of you*.”

This opening chapter of Jeremiah contains a lovely image of God’s abundant provision for his servants. Jeremiah was worried that he would not have the words to speak as God’s prophet and God took action to remedy the problem. God reached out and touched Jeremiah’s mouth and declared, “*Look, I have put my words in your mouth!*” (1:9). In a striking, visual way, God showed Jeremiah that he didn’t need to be anxious about having enough words to say because God placed his words in his mouth. After he feels the touch of the Master’s hand, he is ready for his prophetic ministry.

I really love this image of God touching Jeremiah and I think that this image can be really helpful for us on an individual and congregational level as we strive to do the work that God has given us. I know that I often feel ill equipped for the task. Yet amidst our excuses, anxieties and hesitations, God places his hand upon us and says, “I’ve given you all that you need and more.” Touched by God’s Spirit we are empowered and equipped for mission. But we need to respond and step out in faith. This little story may help us to understand what it means to step out in faith.

Apprehensive about a book project he was about to start on, A.J. Jacobs relates how a Rabbi told him a *midrash* to encourage him. A midrash is a story or a legend that is not in the Bible, but which deals with biblical events. This particular midrash was about the parting of the Red Sea. He writes, “We all think of the scene in the *Ten Commandments* movie with Charlton Heston, where Moses lifted up his rod and the waters rolled back. But this midrash says that’s not how it happened. Moses lifted up his rod, and the sea did not part. The Egyptians were closing in, and the sea wasn’t moving. So a Hebrew named Nachshon just walked into the water. He waded up to his ankles, then his knees, then his waist, then his shoulders. And right when water was about to get up into his nostrils, the sea parted. The point is, sometimes miracles occur only when you jump in” (Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically,* p. 13).

Sometimes, we simply need to jump in, even when the task appears to be overwhelming. I’m sure that Jeremiah felt a bit overwhelmed when God gave him this assignment -“*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*” (1:10). God’s challenging word causes me to reflect upon about what needs to be uprooted and torn down in my life, so that God’s work of renewal can happen. What needs to be uprooted and torn down in our lives, our church and our world, so that God’s rebuilding work can begin? What is God calling us to tear down, so that something new might be build up? Whatever God is calling us to do, we need not be afraid, for God is with us, providing us with everything we need for the task he has called us to.