

Chapter 13, The Path
Jeremiah 1:4-10
January 28, 2018
The Reverend Bonnie Underwood

We're All Called

Today we continue our preaching series on *The Path*, the Bible survey we've been studying together this year as a parish. Chapter 13 introduces us to several Old Testament prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah. And just so we're all in sync, I want to be sure we recognize that prophets are not some kind of ancient fortune tellers, but instead are those who speak on behalf of God, carrying important messages to God's people. Biblical prophets are inspired teachers and proclaimers of the will of God and we find that often their messages do contain warnings about the consequences of our actions.

Some prophets are thrilled to be called to the job, doing their own version of a happy dance, an excited "pick me, pick me!" when they hear God's call.

But most are reluctant at best. Think of Moses, telling God's presence in the burning bush that he really isn't the right guy to visit Pharaoh — after all, their relationship isn't all that great and besides, Moses doesn't particularly speak that well. Or Jonah, who tries to run away from God, rather than speak to the Ninevites — which is how he wound up in the belly of a fish. And today we hear that Jeremiah is also protesting. Not me, Lord, I don't know yet how to speak. I'm WAY too young. I'm sure there's someone better for you to ask.

There's a pattern we tend to see when God calls a prophet: the prophet objects, God reassures, and eventually, the prophet gets to where God wants the prophet to be. For God knows us and God knows Jeremiah. God knew him before he was born, before he was ever called or set apart to fulfill God's purpose. And God knows that Jeremiah is the one for this work, for God's own self is at his side. God has a big job for Jeremiah. God's people were captured by the Babylonians and the inhabitants of Jerusalem were taken into exile. It's a difficult and trying time for all God's people, a time when circumstances have to make them wonder whether God was actually still with them.

And it's in this time of national crisis, that Jeremiah is told to tell the people to get their act together: to remember they are a people of God and begin to act like it. It's in this chaotic time that God tells Jeremiah to not be afraid, for Jeremiah has been appointed to the task of nation building, of helping to bring the nation to a better place. Yes, God's message will call for repentance and transformation, for God's judgment can lead to destruction: to plucking up and pulling down, to destroying and overthrowing. A tough message for Jeremiah to deliver, that will bring him pain and heartache. But there's also a message of hope: to build and to plant, to look ahead to the future, to the possibilities of renewal and recreation. And Jeremiah is faithful in delivering all of God's message.

Most of us are not all called to be prophets, nor called to speak to all the nations. But we are all called: called to be who God created us to be, called to use our own unique gifts, strengths, and abilities to serve our Living God. We too are nation builders, called to create God's kingdom here on earth.

Following God is not easy. Walking this unconventional path means finding time to listen to God. It means living lives that seek to see that God-spark in others, and serving Christ by carrying Jesus' compassion into the world. It's hard work in the best of times to love God by loving our neighbor — and it's a much greater challenge in divisive times — and today we too live in divisive times.

Just before the holidays I attended a lecture at Christ Church in Charlotte by Dr. Brené Brown. Brené is an academic, an author, an Episcopalian, and a licensed social worker who was speaking about her

most recent book, *Braving the Wilderness*. This book builds on Brené's past work about courage, vulnerability, empathy, and shame.

Brené spoke about our natural desire to belong, to connect with others, but today, many of us instead are experiencing a kind of spiritual disconnection, a diminished sense of shared humanity. The more we sort and divide ourselves into factions, separating ourselves from others, the easier it can be for us to eventually find that the only thing that binds us together is shared fear, disdain, and even hate for others, rather than recognizing our shared humanity and our common, inextricable connection as God's own creation.

And this happens because we're all vulnerable to the practice of dehumanizing others. Brené explained that this process begins with words — words that describe someone else as *less than* — those who we claim are morally inferior or subhuman for whatever reason — gender, race, sexuality, political point of view, economic class, country of origin.

Think about how real this is, just how easy it is to dehumanize another. Imagine a time when you were truly offended or hurt by language used about one of us, those within our own tribe, those who align with what we personally think or believe. Can you think of an instance? Now, I'm going to ask you to be very honest with yourself. Are you equally offended or hurt when those same or similar words are used to describe those from outside our tribe — those others, on the opposite side?

For most of us, I imagine that answer is no. We may chuckle, maybe even inwardly cheer, at the insults thrown at those others — yet we will quickly express our righteous indignation about those same insults tossed towards those who align with us. And it's precisely this kind of dehumanizing language that can cause us to forget our spiritual connections, to fail to recognize the humanity of strangers. And our use of dehumanizing language is only the first step. Words become images and images, over time, can lead to violence. Think about it historically: acts of extreme violence can only occur when the other, the enemy, is seen as less than human.

I wonder if this dehumanizing way of thinking of one another also creates the conditions of our own troubled times: an inability to communicate, another government shutdown, another school shooting, continuing racial inequity, and a host of other significant issues that we seem unable to prevent or even address, for we are too broken to listen to one another.

The brokenness we experience in the world, the effects of broken relationships with God, is part of our human lives. Yet God is with us. And just as God gave Jeremiah the gift of God's words, God gives each of us the gifts we need to carry God's light into the world in our own day and time. I hear in today's reading not only Jeremiah's call, but our own. How are we called to get our act together and called to connect with God and our neighbor, in our own broken and divisive world? How are we called to build and to plant, creating community?

We begin the journey to find answers to these questions by listening to God — by creating times to read and inwardly digest Scripture — not just looking for what a particular passage means, but also how that passage is speaking to us in our own time and place. Create some quiet spaces to hear God's still, small voice, to feel the nudging of the Spirit. Take the time to ask, "God, what is it that you're calling me to do?" Talk to me or Fr. Keith about what's on your heart.

We begin the journey by listening to others. Find opportunities to listen to those whose stories different than our own, with hearts open to hearing other points of view. Sign up for Family Promise training so you can join others in hosting our families here at Holy Spirit, and come to know the stories of those who face homelessness in our own community. Or consider participating in the next Women's Interfaith Network meeting, a time for us to come to know face-to-face people of other faiths. Or read books like *Braving the Wilderness*, which can help us to recognize what it will take from each of us to reverse the current trends of isolation and instead cultivate a culture of true belonging within our communities.

We are all called to share the good news, the truth of God's love, as shown to us by the ultimate source of our intimate connections, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For Jesus is the one who encourages us

to hold hands with strangers, who invites us all to be nourished and strengthened by sharing in his Body and Blood at his table. We can do this transformative work together, with God's help. For God knows us and loves us and is always with us, encouraging us to reconnect with one another and respond to God's call to carry love and compassion into the world. Amen.