

“Who’s Writing This Story, Anyway?”

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

5 ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’

6 Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak,  
for I am only a boy.’

7 But the Lord said to me,

‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”;

for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

8 Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you to deliver you,’

says the Lord.’

9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;

and the Lord said to me,

‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.

10 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.’

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

There's so much in this text to unpack. But today, what keeps grabbing me is the fact that this conversation about Jeremiah's call and vocation begins with God. The word of the Lord *came to* Jeremiah. Not the other way around. And just so we don't miss this point, God says, "Before *I formed* you in the womb *I knew* you... before you were born *I consecrated* you. *I appointed* you a prophet to the nations." The grammar nerds out there will notice immediately that God is the *subject* of the verbs in these first verses, and Jeremiah is the *object*. God is the one acting. Jeremiah is being acted upon. God is the one who forms and knows Jeremiah. God is the one who consecrates and appoints Jeremiah. The work, the ministry, the vocation Jeremiah is called to - God is the one who started it all.

That point is worth noting, even though it seems obvious, because once Jeremiah starts talking, we might never have known that God was the one who started this conversation. Because Jeremiah literally changes the subject. Instead of allowing God to remain the subject of the verb, Jeremiah makes *himself* the subject, the one who acts. "*I do not know* how to speak... *I am* only a boy." Jeremiah is right. He is young. He has little to no experience, especially in the realm of speaking, which he'll be doing lots of as a prophet. His statement is not untrue. But in his fearfulness and disbelief that God would call little, inexperienced, ill-equipped him, Jeremiah has taken a story that began with a God powerful enough to form, know, consecrate and appoint him and he makes it about all the inadequacies and qualities that are lacking in himself. Jeremiah takes the huge story God is writing and makes it as small as his own vulnerabilities and insecurities.

Maybe you see yourself in Jeremiah's response. If we listen closely, I believe God is always calling us to some work, some vocation, some ministry that is unique to our setting and context. I think this happens every time something in you comes alive or sparks when you hear about a particular job, a ministry, a volunteer opportunity. I think this happens when your next door neighbor starts opening up to you about a place of pain in their life, because you have been one who listens to them. I think this happens when a grandchild is going through a rough time and turns to you to find some help, answers, and support. And as your pulse quickens at that opportunity, as you look into the face of that person coming to you for help, I wonder if you, like Jeremiah are quick to retreat from God's call into your own mind with thoughts like:

"I don't have the training to serve that population."

"My finances and my skill set are so limited - what do I possibly have to offer that would make a difference?"

"What if this hurting person asks a question about what to do next and I don't have an answer?"

Just about every prophet called in the Bible hesitated in one way or another when God called them. They point to their weakness, their inexperience, their crumby public speaking skills, their vulnerability in relation to what God was asking them to do. It's one of the reasons I keep coming back to the Bible - for in its pages, I always seem to find someone just as fragile and afraid as me.

But if we keep eavesdropping on this conversation between God and Jeremiah, we find good news for reluctant prophets and fearful disciples everywhere. Though we may try to take the grand

story God is writing from the powerful and caring hands that formed us in the womb, God is always bigger than we imagine or remember. Here's what I find so beautiful about the way the sentences are structured in God's response to Jeremiah's fear and trembling. God allows Jeremiah to become the subject of the verb going forward in the conversation, almost like She is meeting Jeremiah in that small, fearful space that seems to be closing in on him. But then God keeps the sentence going by coming alongside Jeremiah in the action: 'Do not say, "I am only a boy",'  
God begins, "for *you shall go* to all to whom *I send* you, and *you shall speak* whatever *I command* you." God turns Jeremiah's fearful retreat into the first step of a beautiful dance. It's God saying, "Yes, Jeremiah, you will go, but it is to the place that I, the main character in this story, am sending you. Yes, Jeremiah, you will speak, but it will be with the words that I, the one who formed you and knew you before you were born, will give you to say. In other words, Jeremiah, you're right - you are part of this story. But it is my story, and in it, you will never be alone." "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,' says the Lord."

What I love about how the Spirit arranged worship this morning is that we were given a beautiful example of this dance between God's call and our human response in our friend Julie Lipke who will be going with a group to serve immigrant families at our southern border. Julie shared with me a few weeks ago that she has been losing sleep over what has been happening to families at our southern border for months now. Like so many of us, she has been asking, "What am I supposed to do in the face of an injustice this horrendous and massive?" In her own words to me in an email earlier this week, Julie said, "I have no idea how

all this will go or what will develop from the experience. I only know that I am grateful for the opportunity to serve in a way that I feel will make a difference in the lives of those at our southern border.” What I hear in that, in all that Julie has shared, is that she is letting God be the subject of the verbs in this story God is writing. What I hear is a simple truth that can set us free from fear as God’s calling and our hands and feet get wrapped up together in the same sentence. That truth is this: Our lack of knowledge or experience, the ways we are inadequate or small are not the point of the story God is writing. God is the main character and God’s loving work is the transformative power driving the plot of this story forward. And when we open up about what is making us afraid, God meets us there, and helps us take the next step in the dance God is leading. And somehow, the God who goes before us is the same God who will be walking alongside us on the journey. The God who came alongside young, inexperienced Jeremiah is the same God who comes with us as we take one step at a time on the path of vocation to which we are called. This God formed us and knows us. We do not need to be afraid. Amen.