

## “Before I Formed You in the Womb...”

Jeremiah 1.4-10

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Meet Jeremiah, another of the great prophets of ancient Israel. Here he is, as depicted by Michelangelo in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He is known as the “weeping prophet” because of his tearful laments, and while you may not be able to see tears in this image, you can certainly get a sense of his grief. And here he is, as painted by Rembrandt; again note the sadness conveyed by his posture. Both of these paintings depict him as an old man, after a lifetime in service to the Almighty ... and after the terrible destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire, and the deportation of many Jews to the country of Babylon – far, far away from their beloved home.

But those events happened late in Jeremiah’s life and ministry. He did not start out his life so stricken with grief. That sentiment emerged over time, a response to the events that he witnessed and, to an extent, took part in. Sometimes things happen in life that can change a person forever.

Our passage today is about the call of Jeremiah. Jeremiah as a youth, or a young man, responding to God’s claim upon his life. Imagine a younger Jeremiah, perhaps something like this. This is a painting of a young Jeremiah, by a less-well-known artist named Horace Vernet, a French painter from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Around Jeremiah are the ruins of Jerusalem – a symbolic representation of what Jeremiah would witness later on in life. For when he was young, Jerusalem stood strong.

Jeremiah, the Bible tells us, was from a village called Anathoth, just a couple miles northeast of Jerusalem. Jeremiah grew up in the shadow of that great city. His father, Hilkiyah, was a priest. Some scholars think Hilkiyah was the *high* priest, the priest-in-charge-of-*all*-the-priests, for we know that there was a high priest named Hilkiyah at exactly this same time. That Hilkiyah is remembered for discovering a copy of the book of Deuteronomy in the treasury of the temple, and bringing it to the king, who – upon reading it – launched a massive series of religious reforms. For not only had the leaders and people of Israel strayed far from the biblical mandate over the course of several centuries, they had also somehow managed to *lose some of the most important books!* The book of Deuteronomy had been neglected and forgotten, until Hilkiyah the high priest found it. *That might have been Jeremiah’s dad!* We’re not 100% sure – but it’s certainly an intriguing possibility, and it would help to explain Jeremiah’s religious fervor and devotion. For Jeremiah’s whole ministry was basically an extended recapitulation of the teachings that had originally been contained in the Book of Deuteronomy and the rest of the Law of Moses.

Our passage this morning tells us how that ministry got started. Jeremiah hears, or senses, the Lord God Almighty, speaking directly to him: “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.” How old, exactly, Jeremiah was when he heard those words, we do not know. He calls himself a “boy,” a *na’ar*, a Hebrew word that could be used to describe a young lad anywhere from birth to about age 20. Is he 8? Or is he 12? Is he 16? Or is he 20? We have no idea. We just know that he’s young. Or at least, he *thinks* he’s young; he thinks he’s *too* young for the job: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!”

But God cares not about his age. There are no minimums ages when you are working for God. There are no maximum ages, either. Some of the greatest leaders and teachers in the Bible didn’t get started until they were much, much older. Abraham responded to the call of God at age 75. Moses’ ministry began at age 80! But Jeremiah’s ministry began much, much earlier – maybe a child, maybe a teen. It makes no difference *when* you are called by God to do God’s work. What matters is whether you *will*, when you are called.

So Jeremiah objects. “Don’t send me,” he is saying; “I’m just a kid!” But God will have none of that: “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’ for you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.” *I don’t care if you think you’re too young, God is saying; you’re the right person for the job. I need help, and I need you to be my helper. I’m going to send you to a bunch of different people, to proclaim my word to them. Some of them aren’t going to like it; some of them aren’t going to welcome it; some of them are going to do all sorts of mean and nasty things to you. Don’t let any of that bother you; don’t let any of that prevent you from doing the things I’m going to ask you to do. I will be with you. My presence matters a whole lot more than any human opinion. I will keep you safe – no matter what they may do to you.*

Now if this had been *you* receiving this call from God, how would *you* have responded? First of all, would you have even *heard God speaking to you*? For hearing God requires an attentive ear, and a heart that believes that God truly does *speak* to us in the midst of our daily lives. Not all ears are open, and not all hearts believe. But even if you have heard God’s voice, have heard God beckoning you to undertake a certain course of action, there comes that moment of decision. Are you going to say *yes*?

What will happen if you do? How will your life be different? How much will you do that you will feel *good* about? What acts of service will you perform, in God’s name? How many people will *thank* you for doing your work, for fulfilling your call? How much *genuine appreciation* will you receive?

And ... what will God ask you to do that will be hard? What will he ask you to do that will *stretch* you, outside your comfort zone, outside your areas of specialized training? What situations will you face that you never envisioned? What will you be asked to do that won’t be very popular? That won’t meet with universal acclaim? What will you have to say to people who simply don’t want to listen to you? What opposition will you face? What enemies will you make? Will anyone try to take you down?

And ... what will you have to give up? What sacrifices will you have to make? What will you discover about yourself that you will have to deal with? What if a day comes when you feel like you’ve given all you have, that there’s just not any more left to give, that you feel completely and utterly spent,

worn out, exhausted? What if there comes a day when you question whether you made the right decision? What if a day comes when you think that God made a mistake, calling *you*?

What if, by the time your ministry ends, you end up looking like *this*? Or ... like *this*?!?

There are reasons why God calls the people he calls. The jobs he asks some people to do are not jobs that just *anybody* could do. They require a certain kind of devotion, determination, stamina, and resolve. Jeremiah became a prophet not because *he* wanted to. It wasn't a vocation Jeremiah *chose*. He became a prophet because *God chose him*. Because God knew he had the *right stuff* for the job.

And God had known that even before Jeremiah was born. "Before I formed you in the womb I *knew you*." I *knew* what kind of qualities you would have. I knew what kind of *character* you would have. What *inner strengths* you would possess. What *courage* you would be able to muster. I knew the inclinations of your heart, that they were for *good*. That they were for *me*.

Someone I know and respect, someone skilled in the area of human resources, once said to me something like this: "You can teach other people *skills*. You can't necessarily teach people *character*." When you're hiring someone for a job, you gotta look at their *character*. They can learn the skills.

Jeremiah had the *character*. God knew it. God knew it from the beginning, from before the time Jeremiah was a babe in his father's arms. Before Jeremiah was born, God had already *chosen* him, *consecrated* him, *appointed* him: a prophet to the nations.

And what about you? What aspects of your character did God know about, in advance? What task, what ministry, did God have in mind for *you*, from *your* very beginning? Do you know what it is that God wants *you* do to with your life, what unique tasks God has in mind for *you*, that *you* are perfectly suited for? Are you doing it? Have you done it? Is there *more* God might be asking you to do?

Or if you haven't even gotten started yet ... *what's holding you back*? Are you pulling a Jeremiah? "Oh, I'm too young, send someone else." Or a Moses? "I can't talk very well, I stutter, send someone else." Or a Jonah? "I don't want to do it, God, *send someone else!*"

When God lays claim upon your life ... he's just going to keep coming back ... and back ... and back. *When are you going to find it in your heart to say "yes" to God's call?*

Thank goodness, when God calls us, he also *equips* us. He doesn't leave us to just fend for ourselves. "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth," says Jeremiah. God is – quite literally – putting *words* in Jeremiah's mouth. He's conveying to Jeremiah *what Jeremiah needs to say*. The call came first. The *equipping* came next. *Don't make the mistake of waiting till you feel like you're "ready" before saying "yes" to God's call*. God will give you what you need, to do the job he's asking you to do. "Now I have put words in your mouth," says God to Jeremiah. "I've equipped you for your ministry. Now go. Go out there and do my work. Go out there and do *what I need you to do*."

Ditto, my friends, for you: *Go out there and do God's work*. The work that God *needs* you to do.

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