

“A Heavenly Mouthful” Luke 13:10-17; Jeremiah 1:4-10

Rev. Michele Ward Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church

Baltimore, MD August 28, 2022

HEBREW SCRIPTURE READING Jeremiah 1:4-10 (NRSVue)

Rev. Michele Ward

The second reading today comes from the prophet Jeremiah.
Listen now for a word from God.

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

“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.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a
boy.” 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.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the Lord.”

Then the hand of the Lord touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
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.”

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

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PRAYER

God, we come to you this morning, hungry for your living word. Our hearts are in all sorts of places and spaces - grief, joy, sadness, love, fear, contentment. We are a tapestry of emotions and thoughts. Still our minds so we may hear your Spirit whispering to us above the interrupting thoughts, laundry lists, calendar reminders, and future anxieties that fill our heads. May the words I say and the intentions of our hearts give you glory, O God. Amen.

SERMON

Joshua Coleman, our soloist this morning, sang “Go Down Moses,” an African American spiritual about the life and prophetic words of Moses. “Let my people go,” is the refrain in this powerful song. These are the words that God commanded Moses to declare to Pharaoh in order to set the enslaved Jews free from Egypt. The Hebrew tradition considers Moses the first prophet of Israel. He is at the beginning of a long line of leaders who speak truth to power, declare hope in the face of despair and exile, and tell the story of God’s redemptive love. The Jewish people ask for a prophet in Deut. 18 who will protect them from their enemies and will share God’s word with them. Not only does God fulfill this promise through Moses, but also through the prophetic ministry of his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam. These leaders guide and chastise God’s people. God promises that they will not be the last prophets of Israel, telling the people, “I will put my words in [their] mouth[s].” They will be the beginning of a long line of prophets God will call, prepare, and send (Deut. 18:18).

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Roughly six hundred years later in the history of the Jewish people we meet our prophet for this morning, Jeremiah, a young God encounters. He is the son of Hilkiyah, a priest. Jeremiah would have been next in line to be a priest, not a prophet, following in his father’s footsteps into the Jewish priesthood. At this time, Solomon’s Temple was in Jerusalem and Israel still had their royal dynasty. If life had gone according to his family’s plan, Jeremiah would have led a respectable life shepherding his community as a religious leader.

That is not the plan that God had for Jeremiah. He lived and prophesied in the kingdom of Judea in the 4th/5th century BCE. And, you may know him for his other books like 1 & 2 Kings, the Book of Lamentations, and his 52 chapter prophecy simply titled the Book of Jeremiah. Biblical scholars refer to him as “the weeping prophet” due to the grief, rage, and sorrow that fills the majority of his prophecies. He will experience death threats, poverty, illness, exile, and prophesies the destruction of Solomon’s Temple.

Have you ever heard the saying, “Life is what happens to you while you’re making other plans?”¹ I’d like to make a small edit: “God is what happens to you while you’re making other plans.” Specifically, God is what happens to Jeremiah while his family is making other plans. As a young boy training in the priesthood, God speaks to Jeremiah. And not in a soft, dreamy state. This visitation from God changes the course of his life.

¹ Allen Saunders, 1957, Reader’s Digest

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The Hebrew word for “touch,” used to describe touching Jeremiah’s mouth, is not a gentle tap. It is the same distinct moment of prophetic gifting for major Jewish prophets Isaiah (Isaiah 6:7) and Daniel (Daniel 10:16). The act of God reaching out God’s hand to make contact with a human person, touching them on the lips, is a sign that God has chosen them. When God reaches out to physically touch anyone, like when the heavenly being wrestles with Jacob all night in Genesis, they touch Jacob’s hip socket, leaving him with a limp for the rest of his life. God’s touch costs Jeremiah. God’s touch costs Jacob. And it may cost us, too.

Old Testament professor at Duke Divinity School, Dr. Anthea Portier-Young, observes that “it should sound intimate, but we should not imagine that it was a gentle or comforting touch. The same verb, *ng’*, can also mean to strike (Job 19:21) or to harm (Psalm 105:15).² I have often wondered what it cost Jeremiah for God to touch his lips. What did it cost Isaiah when the coal touched his lips at the beginning of his prophetic ministry? What did it cost Daniel when God reached out to him? Was Jeremiah’s mouth scarred or wounded, a physical reminder of how God changed the course of his life?

When we imagine this moment of prophetic call for Jeremiah, I want us to imagine that God’s touch is not soothing or parental. God’s touch pushes Jeremiah. God’s touch knocks Jeremiah. God’s touch shakes Jeremiah. And honestly, Jeremiah needed that kind of touch. He was rooted in place and

² “Commentary on Jeremiah 1:4-10, February 3, 2019.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-14-10-7>

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ignoring God’s call because of fear. He tells God honestly, “I am only a child, I cannot speak for you.” He is young when God jolts him out of his well planned life and into another one. His lack of experience does not keep God from calling him into the prophetic role he will play for the rest of his days.

Jeremiah is terrified. He thought that God already had a plan for his life - to be a priest like his father, and his father’s father, and his father’s father’s father. None of this prophetic business will garner any security or contribute to the legacy that his family built. He seems to struggle to let that go insisting he is too young to be a prophet. Surely God will understand that. He cannot comprehend that God would direct him towards another path when the other one was just fine. Being a priest was a worthy calling, too, Jeremiah might think. Sometimes God shocks us out of our plans in order to show us where we are needed the most. To show us what matters the most.

Some of you may remember that my mother and my sisters were in a car accident that almost killed them on the Altamont Pass heading towards San Francisco six year ago this month. One of my sisters, Monica, was driving the car when a metal pole flew off the back of a truck and shattered the windshield, puncturing my sister Marennna’s skull. My mother and a family friend were sitting in the backseat and sustained no injuries.

The next few moments saved my sister’s life. They were close enough to a call box to call for help. The paramedics arrived with enough time to stop the bleeding and stabilize my sister. The pole fractured the side of her skull, barely missing her eye socket, her optic nerve, and her temple. She turned her head

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at the split second needed to save her life. The next few months were agony for my family. We did not know if Marennna would wake up after brain surgery. We did not know if the bleeding on her brain was too severe or if the swelling would go down. All we could do was sit and wait, watch and pray, trust and hope that a miracle would happen, and Marennna would come back to us.

And come back to us she did. Marennna woke up, but she was like a child again, not a 23 year old like she was. She had to learn everything practically all over again after her traumatic brain injury (TBI). Talking, walking, driving—all of it, brand new, yet agonizingly frustrating because she knew how behind she was. She knew how much effort it would take to retrace the steps of her life at hyperspeed.

Marennna’s life is incredibly full and meaningful. She competes on a women’s Brazilian jiu jitsu team. She is at the top of her class in nursing school. She is devoted to her self-development and never takes no for an answer, striving for the best at all times. I know how agonizing it is to wait for answers. I know how anxiety inducing it is to have minimal updates at all about a loved one’s improvement. I know how scary it is to walk through all of the possible outcomes of a terrible accident, a botched surgery, or a sudden illness. My family and I knew, no matter what kind of life Marennna wanted to live and could live, we would live it together. We would walk that road of healing and recovery with her, no matter where it led.

The near death experience shocked me out of the illusion that life would continue as I had always known it with my family. We would all be relatively

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healthy and happy, with the typical bumps along the way, but nothing catastrophic would happen. I do not believe that God causes tragedy, let me be abundantly clear. I believe that God witnesses our suffering, walking with us. I believe that God gives us the strength we need when we feel as if we cannot face another day or another hour in the midst of the pain we carry.

I'd like to imagine that Jeremiah knows the paradox of uncertainty and commitment, of his weakness and God's strength. He did not know what was about to happen to him until it did. He did not know what direction his life would take until God shocked him out of his family's plan for the priesthood and commanded him to take on the mantle of prophetic ministry.

The poet Christian Wiman left a fundamentalist upbringing in West Texas and abandoned Christian faith. In his 30s he discovered love and rediscovered God while grappling with an aggressive cancer. He writes about cancer, meaning, and how life finds us in his memoir *My Bright Abyss*:

Meditation of a Modern Believer:

“The meanings that God calls us to in our lives are never abstract. Though the call may ask us to redefine, or refine what we know as life, it does not demand a renunciation of life in favor of something beyond it ... [the call] is not some hitherto unknown voice to which we respond; it is life calling to life.”³

We are called, like Jeremiah, through the meanings of our lives. Some of those meanings are deeply shocking, like God jolting Jeremiah into prophetic

³ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (2013).

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ministry. Others are commonplace, like the sound of the kettle boiling on the stove. And some meanings are redefining or shattering, like the car accident that almost killed my sisters and my mother in 2016. God did not ask Jeremiah to renounce his calling as a priest in order to be a prophet. But God did tell him that he was a prophet without any room for argument. God’s call on his life required him to redefine who he thought he would be and how his life would unfold.

Our congregation is two weeks away from the beginning of the program year. Most students in this congregation begin school tomorrow. Our six college-bound freshmen from Brown Memorial moved on to their university campuses all over the country. Some of you are drinking in the last days of summer on vacation or are planning to be away for Labor Day weekend. My neighborhood, Greenmount West, celebrated our 44th annual Back to School Block Party last night. Late into the night the sounds of a drum line parade, back to school haircuts for kids, and a cookout filled the streets.

In the midst of these transitional days of late summer, as fall comes around the corner to meet us, we are faced with Sharon Holley and Andrew Connors testing positive for covid in the same week as the sudden hospitalization of music minister Michael Britt. He has been at Mercy Medical Center since last Monday evening. Some of you may remember that he was here playing last Sunday, giving his all, using his gifts to transport us a little closer to the holy. Michael is now on a ventilator in critical condition with a diagnosis of bacterial pneumonia. I am in shock, as I imagine many of you are.

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How could Michael, someone so full of life and energy, be hospitalized this quickly? We are left with more questions than answers right now. Like Jeremiah, we may feel ill equipped for the call upon us as a congregation. How can we help Michael? How can we be there for his husband, George? How will we prepare for the beginning of the program year? How will we pull off choir rehearsals, figure out what anthems to select or soloists to sing? How could this happen to Michael? How can we do this? How will we do this?

Like Jeremiah, God will give us the words to say. God will give us the comfort to offer. God will give us the songs to sing. God will give us the people we need for the moment that we are in as a congregation. Do not say, “We cannot do this.” Instead, God will send us to the people we need to be with in the moment we need to be with them. God will command us to speak the words we are meant to speak. God sees and hears us. God is with us. God is with Michael and George. None of us are alone, even in the midst of shock and uncertainty.

God called Jeremiah to stand in places and hold on to hope when all others around him had given up that a new day was possible. We are called, like Jeremiah and Miriam before him, to see and feel the suffering around us. We are called to proclaim God’s redemptive love in the midst of that pain. No matter how ill prepared or poorly skilled you may feel, God is the one preparing you. God is the one equipping you. God is the one filling your cup when you are empty. God gave Jeremiah a heavenly mouthful to share with the world - what will you do with the call upon you in this time and place?