

**A Sermon – by Alex Evans**  
**From Sunday, July 27, 2008**  
**Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA**  
**Selections from Jeremiah (1:4-10, and others)**  
**“Jeremiah’s Journey”**

A cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine by Peter Steiner depicts two dogs at a computer. One dog instructs the other dog, “This is really great - on the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

But, we know better don’t we? I am continually surprised when I get emails from Amazon.com telling me that since I purchased a certain book some months ago, I might like a similar new book. “why not check it out?!” the email urges me. No, even a dog’s identity would be quickly recognized based on his surfing and spending patterns tracked by resourceful dot.com entrepreneurs. The bones and flea collars charged to his Visa card would give him away. Internet anonymity provides only limited cover.

Perhaps the Internet is only the latest arena for the human tendency toward pretense, toward trying to fool others about who we really are. That particular character issue has always dogged us (no pun intended); computers only make it slightly more interesting for a while.

What really might be great is if some new technology actually helped us be more honest, more authentic, more kind to one another in all our communication. The question is, would anyone ever use it? (from Stephen Bauman, *Simple Truths*, p. 126).

As we move today into some reflections about the prophet Jeremiah, there is something really gripping and most interesting in the opening verses. For the young boy called to be God’s voice, a prophet, there is no hiding behind an Internet screen; there is no anonymity. There is for him only one way – one direction for his life. God reminds Jeremiah – “before I formed you, I knew you; before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

For Jeremiah for sure, and for all of us actually, as much as we would prefer it, there is really no hiding, no need to dupe anyone, no room for pretense. Life is grounded in God. That is the truth that is meant to shape our lives and set the course for our lives. God says to Jeremiah – “before I formed you I knew you” – and the Hebrew word for “know” is interchangeable with the word “chosen.” Before I formed you, I chose you. Before you thought of yourself, I thought of you with specific intentions, with specific work to do. Jeremiah would be a prophet to the nations.

Let me give you a bit of context for these words, for these words are deeply imbedded in the long and important story of God and God’s people. You remember that God called Abraham and Sarah to become God’s people in the world. They, along with their descendents would find life and hope, blessing and purpose with God – in covenant, in an agreement that God would be their God, and the people would worship and serve God. Those great stories of Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants are all found in the book of Genesis as God’s people emerge in the world.

But then God’s people end up in slavery in Egypt, so God calls Moses to lead them to the promised land. Moses does this – it is a long hard journey, but by God’s

mercy and guidance, God's faithfulness and care, the people make it there - to the land of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey – a beautiful and fertile place to prosper and serve God. When you have land, you know you are a people for sure. Moses gets them there. These stories are found in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy.

However, while an emerging people and land are pretty great, and they have it, the people find that they need to organize themselves, so they set themselves in tribes, with leaders and judges. And then they look around and they think, 'how come these other nations have a king, and we have no king. If we are a real people with land and credibility, we need a king.' But God said, "no, .. I am your king.' But the people really wanted an earthly king. So eventually God provides a king – a line of kings. These stories are found in Joshua and Judges, I & II Samuel and I & II Kings. Saul is the first king, then David is the great king, followed by Solomon. Solomon even built the temple for God. And there are many other kings – a few who sought truly to maintain the covenant with God, and a great many who acted like kings and leaders often act – selfish and greedy, all about power and wealth. But across all these centuries, the Israelites emerge as a viable people. They have land; they have a king, they even have a temple. Across all these generations of God caring, God providing, God blessing and sustaining them, there are ups and downs, messy situations and wonderful celebrations. And this takes us all the way from 2000 BC to about 600BC. That is when Jeremiah comes on the scene – around 600BC.

God says, "before I formed you, I knew you; before you were born, I consecrated you – a prophet to the nations."

We talked a bit last week about why God uses and needs prophets. We sometimes think of prophets as people who shout and scream and make us all uncomfortable saying that the world is coming to the end. We sometimes think of prophets as people who predict the future.

Here is a much better definition – a prophet is someone who has been called by God, filled with God's Spirit, to speak on behalf of God, and help imagine, articulate a different world, a better world, a world more aligned with God's world. A real prophet lifts up the truth – "the world is like this right now, imagine if it was like this instead." God uses prophets to move the people and the world to that better realm – a realm of faithfulness, peace and justice, light and hope for all. A faithful voice for God asserts with honesty – "you are not living as God's people – you say you are God's people, you talk like you are God's people, but do God's people hoard, while so many are left with nothing? Do God's people whore after other gods? Do God's people kill, and act like God agrees with it? Can God's people both sing praises to God and not love one another?" See, it is about imagining another way in the world beyond the world that we know and live in - God's world of justice and joy. It is about getting our hearts right. It is about working for that world with lives that are more aligned with God way. That is what Biblical prophets seek to do – imagine and inspire for God's way.

And in the year 600 BC, there is real urgency for God's prophet, Jeremiah, to speak God's word and imagine a new world. The land, given by God through all the generations, had become of place of selfish gain. Those who had more were gaining; those who had less were losing. It was not a place of justice and joy. The king, given by God, continued in a long line of corruption, no longer acting as God's person, or leading for peace and hope; evil, as the scriptures say, was prospering across the region. The

temple, given by God for worship and lives of faithfulness, had become a place of mockery. And, most pressing in 600BC - the Babylonians were approaching from the north, on the verge of conquering the land, the king, and destroying the beloved temple of God in Jerusalem.

So, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah: “out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land;” it is a boiling pot about to be dumped on God’s chosen people. It is doom coming upon the people, because they have made offerings to other gods, they have worshipped the works of their own hands; they have forsaken God’s steadfast love and care; they have forgotten to whom they belong and for whom they live. Hence, Jeremiah’s role through his journey as a prophet is huge and difficult – “to pluck up and tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, and to build and to plant.” Four negative charges – pluck up, tear down, destroy, overthrow, and two positive charges – build and to plant. Jeremiah’s mission, hopefully and finally, is to show the people the way back, to imagine a new life for God’s people free from the corruptions of the day, back to loving God and loving neighbor as God calls all of us.

Consider: if our inherent tendency is to hide in anonymity, hide behind our computer screens and practice deceit and pretense, imagine what Jeremiah wanted to do knowing about his God-given job, his destiny, his chosen-ness! The world that God’s people knew and loved in 600BC was caving in – God was sick of their loud talk but unfaithful lives. God was tired of their noisy worship without love and care for one another, especially the less fortunate. God was worn out on their arrogance as God’s “chosen” people – chosen people are to live as chosen people and there was none of that going on. So the Babylonians were knocking at the door and the Babylonians would be God’s instrument, re-making the world, re-forming God’s people, bringing punishment on the people for their unfaithfulness. And Jeremiah would be this voice, articulating all that was happening to God’s people.

Walter Brueggemann, my teacher earlier this year in a class on Jeremiah, is perhaps the foremost scholar in the world on this prophet. Brueggemann has written numerous books and different commentaries about Jeremiah. And listen to this: Brueggemann argues that Jerusalem in 600BC was comparable to the USA just before 9/11. His point is this – 9/11 may be the most significant symbolic event in our history. It introduced into US thinking and culture, a dimension and depth of vulnerability that was heretofore unthinkable. Two of the tallest buildings in the world could be toppled by a band of terrorists? Who would have thought that possible before that date? The Pentagon – that symbol of power and security - could be attacked? Who would have thought that possible prior to September 11, 2001? These events alerted many people, especially young people, to a world of risk not previously imagined. And Brueggemann argues that this loss of 9/11 is powerfully analogous to the loss of Jerusalem, and the land, and the king, and the temple in 587BC. Both losses involve the exposure of vulnerability. We live in a dangerous world. Both losses remind us that our security is to be in God. If we think we can live on our own, and do what we want, and ignore who God would have us be tending to life, striving for peace, caring for all, we find our selves amidst the rubble. (See W. Brueggemann, The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah, Cambridge, p. 194)

So this is what Jeremiah is up against. Who is going to believe him – nobody thinks they are vulnerable in Jerusalem in that day! They are the “chosen” people.

Jeremiah tries to get out of his role as prophet, saying “I do not know how to speak; I am only a boy.” God says, “you will speak what I say, you shall go where I send you.” And foremost and most importantly, God says, “Do not fear – I am with you to deliver you.”

The pages of the book of Jeremiah convey the story of his words, spoken on behalf of God, hoping to re-imagine a world for God’s people, and how they keep falling on deaf ears. Who wants to hear words of destruction? Who wants to imagine the world differently? Who would believe that God’s people could be conquered? They are arrogant. They are heartless. They have forgotten the covenant and the kind of life that God intends for God’s people.

So Jeremiah’s journey spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the collapse of the kingdom. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of it, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering and striving, writing and believing. By chapter 5 of this book, he is in the middle of crushing storms of hostility as he announces what is happening. By chapter 15, amidst all the tension, he is filled with bitter doubt. “Why was I ever born?” “Why is my pain unceasing?” he asks God as he carries on. The God who is supposed to be living water has become “a deceitful brook” that does not quench any thirst. If you ever wonder whether God can handle deep pain and lament, peruse this book of Jeremiah, because Jeremiah is one who suffered greatly, even as he was “known and chosen and consecrated” by God. Every muscle of his body was stretched to the limit by fatigue and pain. Every feeling in his heart was put through fires of ridicule. (see Peterson’s introduction to Jeremiah in *the Message*.)

What happens when everything you believe in and live by is smashed to bits by circumstances? This is what happened to God’s people soon after 600BC, and what happened to Jeremiah personally too. We know a little about this – some of us in our very lives – with setback and challenge, cancer and therapy, heartache and loss. We know a little about this is our town, on our campus, where fear and death have come so close to all of us. Do we abandon God? Or do we find new ways of experiencing God? Do we hang on to broken illusions? Or are we re-formed, re-shaped in new, deeper ways of seeing, living, loving as God’s people?

The prophet Jeremiah wants always to move us to new ways of experiencing God, to deeper ways of seeing and serving God, no matter what we are dealing with. He is a companion – a surviving, grace-filled, authentic, struggling companion - for the worst times. And no matter how bad it got for Jeremiah and the people in that time, God never deserted them. In chapter 29, God says this: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” That is always a word of our lives!! And as Jerusalem is falling into the hands of Babylon, as the king is facing death, and the people are facing exile, by chapter 32, Jeremiah goes and buys a field in that region of total disaster. Why would anyone buy a field in a place of desolation unless he knew something of what God was doing? Who would invest in a place destroyed, unless he had confidence in God’s promised plans? This is Jeremiah and his journey. He embodies in his very life purpose, suffering, struggling, crying out, and also faithful hope.

Is anything too much for God? It can certainly feel like it: a mentally deranged shooter killing kids in a classroom, a tsunami wiping out entire villages, a new diagnosis of cancer thought to be long-gone, the loss of a spouse and new loneliness after all those years together, a mixed up world with hunger and war and environmental concerns. Is anything too much for God? It can seem like it.

Friends, both Jeremiah and Jesus show us otherwise. Not destruction and desolation, not crucifixion and death – no, nothing can separate us from God’s love. We need to hear that and we need to live that with all the ways we love and serve, today and forever. Amen

**Prayer: In the face of all things – loss and gain, setback and success – we commit our live to loving, living, giving, going, serving Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**

**This sermon was preached as a part of Sunday morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, July 27, 2008 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.**