

Do not say, “I am only…”

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany/ 3rd February

I’ve never met anyone who wanted to be a prophet. I’ve never heard a teenager say she was going to be a prophet one day. You can’t major in being a prophet at college. They’re not in hot demand at career fairs. You won’t find online job postings on Indeed or Ziprecruiter for prophets. I’ve known aspiring artists, musicians, writers; I’ve never known an aspiring prophet. I’ve never met anyone at midlife, searching for a new career, who woke up one morning and said, “I’m going to be a prophet.” And I’ve never heard someone looking back upon their lives say with regret, “I should have been a prophet.”

No one really wants to be a prophet—and if you know someone who does, be worried. By prophet, I’m not talking about someone who predicts the future, like Nostradamus (1503-1566). He was more of a seer or visionary, not a prophet in the biblical sense. The wise rabbi and theologian Abraham Heschel (1907-1972) offered an excellent description of what makes a prophet a prophet, especially a good one. “A prophet’s true greatness,” Heschel said, “is his ability to hold God and man in a single thought.”¹ A prophet speaks on behalf of God to the people, and because the prophet loves God’s people and loves God, the prophet speaks a word of judgment and warning, but also hope. In a recent interview, Kenyatta Gilbert of Howard University Divinity School, in Washington, DC, asked Walter Brueggemann what does it mean to be a prophet. “A prophet,” Brueggemann said, “is someone that tries to articulate the world as though God were really active in it. And, that means on the one hand, to identify those parts of the world that are contradictory to God, but on the other hand, it means to talk the will and purpose that God has for the world that will indeed come to fruition, even in circumstances we can’t imagine.”² Did you hear that? Judgment and hope. But who would be sane enough to want that job?

We don’t wish to become prophets. Prophets are chosen. Prophets are summoned. God speaks. God speaks from out of nowhere. God speaks a word and then gives a word, and the next thing you know you’re a servant of the word. And there’s little you can do about it. It’s an affliction, really. It’s a great responsibility, and you could say it’s an honor and a privilege, but it’s also an affliction, a burden. Take Jeremiah, for example, he’s straightforward about his struggle, and he’s not afraid to complain to God. He’s known as “the prophet of doom,” because of the message God gave him to say to Judah. People mocked him, laughed at him, didn’t want to hear from him. It was painful. So he tried to remain silent, he tried to give up speaking. But he couldn’t do it. He said, “If I say, ‘I will not mention [God] or speak any more in [God’s] name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot’” (Jer. 20:9). Jeremiah confessed this only after being a prophet for a while, this was not his initial response. At first, Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet.

One day, out of nowhere, unbidden, the word of Yahweh spoke to Jeremiah. “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” (Jer. 1:4-5). Jeremiah was elected, chosen for this particular task in the larger work of God. He was summoned.

But Jeremiah tried to wiggle and reason his way out of the call. He had some inkling, no doubt, of what his life would be like. “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak,

for I am only a boy” (Jer. 4:6). God would hear none of this. “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”—the kings and priests of Judah—“for I am with you to deliver you” (Jer. 1:8). God does accept his excuses or allow his fear to stand in the way. Then we’re shown what makes a prophet a prophet, we’re shown how prophets are made. “Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth,” Jeremiah tells us, “and the LORD said to [him], ‘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’” (Jer. 1:9-10). Judgment and hope. Then Jeremiah began to speak.

Not everyone is called to be a prophet. But if we’re honest, there is a little Jeremiah in each of us. You know him. You can hear his voice in you. It’s the voice that says, “I do not know how to..., for I am only....” You know that logic, that sequence, that response. Now, it might be true. It might be true that you don’t know how to..., for you are only.... It’s surely a sign of wisdom and humility to know what you know and don’t know about yourself. It might be true, but it might also be an excuse. Jeremiah assumes that he is inadequate for what is being asked of him because, he says, he’s “only” a child. *Only*. This word is like the word “just.” “I am ‘just’ a child.” “Just” and “only,” they can be such soul-crushing words. Sometimes our excuses are reasonable, we know what we’re incapable of, and so they protect us. But, sometimes our excuses keep us in the dark where we can hide in our illusions. That’s why *disillusionment* is essential to the life of faith. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, “Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion — about ourselves, about the world, about God — and while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing, to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth.”³

Sometimes our excuses keep us from living into the truth of what we are capable of. And so we hide behind our perceived inadequacies. Very often it’s fear that holds us back. We are reluctant to claim the capacity that lies dormant within us. My friend, James Hollis, a Jungian psychoanalyst, says, “Fear of our own depths is the enemy.”⁴ I think he’s right. God’s call to Jeremiah was an invitation to live beyond the confines of his self-imposed limitations, beyond his fear, into a more expansive, purposeful, extremely demanding, yet fulfilling purpose for his life. Very often, to say, “I am only...” is to choose for something less than what God desires for us; it is to choose against God’s call in our lives, it is to deny and resist the summons.

C. G. Jung (1875-1861) said people often “live as though they were walking in shoes too small for them.”⁵ The good news is that God knows who we really are, and what we’re capable of, and invites us to fill larger shoes. That’s what God, that’s what God’s *word* is always doing: summoning us into a fuller life, a more expansive life, a more just and compassionate and loving and love-giving life. The good news is that we don’t receive the summons or fit into those larger shoes without God’s help. God tells us who we really are. And we are always more than who or what we think we are. “Do not be afraid...for I am with you....” God reaches out to touch our mouths, our words, our hearts, our lives, and works through us and calls us forward into life. “Do not be afraid...for I am with you....”

What is God calling you toward? Can you hear the summons? You can be confident that God is still speaking. Are you hiding? Full of excuses? Afraid? All of this is natural and normal when it comes to listening to the depths. The fearful child in us says, “I do not know how...for I am only....” But the assurance and promise given to Jeremiah holds true for us, “Do not be afraid...for I am with you....” That’s the voice that frees us to live into the call.

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial, 2001), 25

² Interview with Walter Brueggemann, *Sojourners*, 2018: <https://sojo.net/media/what-does-it-mean-be-prophetic-today>

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Abingdon Press, 2008), 20.

⁴ James Hollis, *The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1993), 106.

⁵ C. G. Jung, “Analytical Psychology and ‘Weltanschauung,’” *Collected Works*, Vol. 8 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), par. 739.