

## BEFORE—AND NOW

### JEREMIAH 1: 4-10

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Sometime ago a psychiatrist went on a fishing trip with a friend affluent enough not only to fly but also to own his own seaplane. The two went to the lake country in northern Minnesota where lake follows lake with only an isthmus between. As there are no villages or towns, let alone any industry, the water is remarkably clear. Flying low they could see forty feet into the depths of the lakes and looking down at one particular scene: behold, no fish. But two fishermen, happily angling on a sunny day.

The psychiatrist and his friend thought the only decent thing to do was to land the plane and tell the fishermen “no fish.” Which they did. As they flew off, the psychiatrist mused, “I had anticipated their disappointment but not their hostility.” But then he went on, “It wasn’t as if we had said to them, ‘Come with us, boys, and we will take you home to your wives and you can take a week off some other time,’ or ‘Come with us and we will take you to another lake where you can put down your lines and pull fish in the way the disciples did in the Sea of Galilee.’ No, we left them there where there wasn’t a blessed thing else to do but fish. So on they went, only now twice as angry, twice as frustrated as before.”

And there you have our American predicament today. Do you remember a year ago this month? Do you remember our euphoria when Barack Obama was inaugurated? Do you recall our hopes, our dreams that after eight years of lies, deceit, right wing dominance, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, a war in Iraq and eight years of war in Afghanistan, CIA kidnappings and torture—as a friend of mine in South Carolina would say, “and on and on and on”—we believed that a new day was dawning.

Then came President Obama’s response to the banking crisis: he named two men who had helped engineer the crisis to his cabinet and his advisory staff and they in turn gave the banks everything they wanted with no regulation, no reprimand for hedge fund trading and credit default swaps, no answer to our vast unemployment. Similarly, Mr. Obama promised to reconsider the war in Afghanistan, and after much consideration and hours of meetings, he decided to send thirty thousand more troops into a losing situation—one which has only worsened.

Enough. I could go on about health care, the fact that one in five American families does not have enough to eat—in the richest country in the history of the world!—about unemployment rates that are the highest since the Great Depression, about the new proposals the president has made to cut Medicare and Medicaid while increasing the already bloated budget of the Pentagon.

A large segment of the American population is like those two fishermen in Minnesota. We know there are no fish in the lake but in our frustration and anger, all we can do is keep on fishing. We know that the answer to crime is not to build more and bigger prisons. We know that unemployment will not be alleviated under our present economic policies. We know that we do not know how to deal with jihad and al Qaeda any more now than we did before September 11, 2001.

Our temptation is to think of these problems being solved by “great” people, important people, elected leaders and gurus and rich folks who obviously must be smart because they have made so much money. Today’s First Lection knocks down that kind of pretension and frustration. The call of Jeremiah to his vocation democratizes the experience.

Calls from God are scary. Tell someone God spoke to you, and watch the reaction. When I talk about arguing with God, I find people to be either a) skeptical, b) amused, c) perplexed, d) wondering—or all of the above. When I talk about God speaking to me, I am not being facetious. I do not hear voices, but I try to pay attention to intuition, to what I know is my better nature. As you have heard me say before, I am like G.K. Chesterton who said, “If I saw a miracle, I probably would say, ‘Would you do that again so that I can gather some data?’” We twenty-first century Christians are always suspended between faith and a willful denial of belief.

Perhaps God’s call is not exactly a voice. It can be a thought you cannot shake—an idea that seems irrational, even crazy. You try to ignore it, but it seems to worm its way into your consciousness again and again.

Remember the owls that bring Harry Potter invitations to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They resemble a call from God, don’t they? Harry’s spiteful and ignorant foster parents try as best they can to destroy the invitations. Finally the deluge of letters ceases when one is personally delivered by angry giant of a man named Hagrid. God’s call was like that for Jeremiah—it was relentless and inevitable.

Jeremiah objected, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But God’s affirmation to him is compelling: “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” (Jeremiah 1:5) The real sense of the passage is that something happened to Jeremiah to convince him to follow God’s call, to affirm his vocation.

Such acceptance of God’s call usually happens only after struggle. And that is true in this story. Jeremiah is not easily cornered by God, especially when God enlarges the call to be “a prophet to the nations.” The Hebrew word for nations, *goyim*, referred in everyday language to the enemies of Israel, to those who sought its destruction.

Please understand: God did not call Jeremiah as God does not call us according to our skills or experience. God does not say, “Don’t worry about your inadequacies. I have a trade school for prophets.” Instead, God says, “Do not be afraid,” which is the most important as well as the most prevalent word in the Bible. “Fear not.” “Never fear.” “Do not be afraid.” Those are not just angelic words, but an offer of salvation and a promise of protection. Perhaps the most familiar words in the Bible are “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

Do you know the story about the little old Christian lady who came out onto her porch every morning and shouted, “Praise the Lord!” And every morning her next door neighbor, a confirmed atheist would yell back, “There is no God!”

This went on for weeks. “Praise the Lord!” yelled the little lady. “There is no God!” responded the neighbor.

As time went by the lady ran into financial difficulties and had trouble buying food. She went out on to the porch one morning and asked God for help with the groceries, then said, “Praise the Lord!”

The next morning when she went out onto the porch, there were the groceries she had asked for. Of course, she shouted, “Praise the Lord!”

The atheist jumped out from behind a bush and exclaimed, “Ha! I bought those groceries. There is no God!”

The lady looked at him and smiled. She shouted, “Praise the Lord! Not only did God provide for me, but God made Satan pay for the groceries!”

Matthew tells us that when the Eleven met Jesus after the resurrection (since Judas had opted out, there were no longer Twelve), they worshiped him. But Matthew adds, “but some doubted.” Actually, the Greek literally says, “And they worshiped him and they doubted.” The two go together, belief and doubt. I have never in my life met anyone with one hundred percent faith—pure, clean, without a shadow of doubt.

Down where I come from, you can read those bumper stickers that declare: “God said it, I believe it, and that’s that.” Any questions? Do the people who put those bumper stickers on their car have a clue how stupid that is? Nobody has pure faith. We all have haunting questions. Why her? Why me? Why that? Why now? They worshiped him and they doubted. Don’t feel bad if you are like the Eleven—you have faith and you doubt.

The primal response in every one of us when we face change is fear. God takes notice of Jeremiah’s fear and God reissues the Bible’s most frequent commandment, “Fear not.”

Jeremiah’s fears are not totally alleviated. His fears continue throughout the book of Jeremiah. He is everybody’s prophet: he shows us that fear, anxiety, resistance, inadequacy, even resentment are understandable reactions to God’s call. But those feelings do not disqualify us from serving God’s intentions.

I know a Presbyterian minister in New York City who has no arms. He was telling a group of us one day about the experience of learning to put on his own clothes. He said his mother always dressed him when he was a boy. She fed him, she dressed him, took care of his every need. One day, she put his clothes in the middle of the floor and said, “Dress yourself.” He said, “I can’t dress myself.” She said, “Well, you will have to dress yourself.” And she walked out of the room.

The man told us, “I kicked. I screamed. I yelled at my mother, ‘You don’t love me anymore.’” Finally he realized that he was going to have to put on his own clothes for the first time in his life. After hours of struggle, he did it. He put on his own clothes without any help.

Only later did he realize that his mother was on the other side of the door and she was crying.

God does not call us, then leave us to our own devices, leave us alone.

You and I are afraid. And we have every right to be. Our president gave us a strong speech last Wednesday night, and he began his State of the Union address by recognizing what we all feel so deeply: we live in a perilous time—economically, politically, morally, spiritually. The same kind of era in which Jeremiah spoke. We have good cause to be afraid, but we must not succumb to excessive fear, the kind that Scott Bader-Saye described, “when we allow the avoidance of evil to trump the pursuit of the good...Our overwhelming fears need to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things.”

Notice the order in which Jeremiah puts the situation. Before building and planting, you break down and pluck up. We prefer just kind of sprucing up our spiritual and moral lives, just tidying up the place a bit, so that we can hang on to what we already have. We are attached to what we have. We have earned all these things.

But when God calls, we have to begin ripping out the old structure. Everything in the garden has to be plowed under so that the builder, the gardener can start over. I'm with that great American philosopher, Woody Allen who said, “I would prefer to achieve immortality without dying.” But no good life from God without our dying to the old self. We are called to toss aside the old priorities. Seeing the baby Jesus, Simeon spoke prophetically that the child was set “for the falling and rising of many” (Luke 2:34).

Jeremiah uses four verbs for this deconstruction which God brings: break down, pluck up, overthrow, destroy. Only two are described for the new creation: to build and to plant. The deconstruction is the harder labor.

The one thing, Kierkegaard reminds us, human beings can do to achieve salvation is to recognize that they can do nothing to achieve salvation. We must begin by relying on God's grace. That is what Jeremiah realizes in his call. Like Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:17) who pleaded that he stuttered; like Gideon (Judges 6:11-24) who pleaded that he came from the wrong side of the tracks; Isaiah (6: 1-13), who pleaded, “Woe is me. I am a person with unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people with unclean lips.” In every case the one who is called objects to the vocation and then is reassured by God.

God tears down so that we can be built up as followers of Christ. God overthrows our past so that we can live fully in the present. As one of the early church fathers said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”