

August 25, 2019 | Summer worship service

Text: [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)

Title: Yes...But...

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Words are powerful. Even sentences as brief as two words can change the whole trajectory of one's life. Think about it: *I love you. I'm sorry. You're pregnant. You're hired. It's cancer. I do.*

In the verses we read this morning, we see God's word transforming Jeremiah's life. It's a brief passage at the beginning of the longest book of scripture. We read the opening verses of this longer work—the beginning of a story that many think spans decades—that while still a young boy, God's word comes to Jeremiah and tells him that he has been formed, claimed, consecrated and appointed to be a prophet to the nations.

God has important work for Jeremiah to do. And, frankly, like most important work, this work will be uncomfortable and at times difficult. Jeremiah will prophesy in the midst of political devastation and human suffering. He will witness the collapse of an empire, the exile of the elite, the scattering of a people, and eventually the destruction even of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jeremiah's words will encourage those who experience these tragedies "to face them, to respond courageously to them, and to look in hope beyond them."¹ Jeremiah will call God's people to find hope in the midst of exile; Jeremiah will call people to reorient their lives to God when the focal point of their faith has been decimated; Jeremiah will call God's people to settle into challenging times, and Jeremiah will even go so far as to suggest that God's people befriend their enemies.

And, perhaps, rightly so, the young Jeremiah we meet as this book opens is daunted by this task. He's aware of the enormity of what he's being asked to do and he is aware of his own limits. He hears God say what is possible, but he hears the voice in the back of his head that starts sentences with the word "But" and cannot trust that God's will can be done through him.

Yes, I'm yours, but I'm young. Yes, you made me, but I have limitations. Yes, you've given me gifts, but I don't have enough experience to make a difference. Yes, there is work to be done, but the task is too big.

Now, Jeremiah's response is, shall we say, a *common* one for God's prophets. There are nearly three chapters alone in the book of Exodus where Moses tries to convince

¹ Jeremiah. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. p 3.

God that he is not the right person to free the Israelite slaves from Egyptian captivity. And then there is Jonah who literally tries to run in the opposite direction of God's call, only to wind up in the belly of the whale. Even Mary, God's willing servant, asks for clarification as to how she, a virgin, can possibly be the mother of the messiah.

It's a big responsibility. It's a great challenge. The work is scary and sometimes seems impossible. It's only *human* to be afraid.

I don't know about you, but I find great comfort in human responses from human beings. I want to do my best, but get tired, frustrated, cranky, or confused. I want to make a difference in the world and be a force of change for good, but there are only so many hours in the day and there is so much that needs to be done. So I find comfort in the fact that the prophets are not those set apart because of their good behavior or good fortune, but are imperfect people like the lot of us, set apart for service by the persistence of God's call.

Much like the prophets of biblical times (though these times span millennia), we too have had these experience of seeing the enormity of the need in the world while also seeing the enormity of our own limitations. We see the needs of a broken world before us, and hear God's call to be instruments of justice and peace. We see the devastation brought about by the broken governments of our day—including our own—and desire to be those who help to usher in the kingdom of *God*.

But how?

How can we minister to children who were separated from their parents and being held in cages when we live so far away from the border? How can we unravel the damage done by racist tweets that fuel the fodder of white supremacy? What can we do to mitigate the escalating trade war with China? How can we feed or clothe those in need when we're living paycheck to paycheck? What can we do when a loved one has a medical crisis, when a friend can't get out of bed because of the weight of their depression, or when a colleague is navigating a messy divorce?

We often find ourselves scanning news feeds or answering phone calls in which we see the enormity of the need around us and don't know what we can do to make a difference. We feel ill-equipped. We feel overwhelmed. We feel small.

There is good news in today's passage. Fortunately, to Jeremiah's "yes...but" God offers a "yes, but" of God's own:

Yes, it's a big job, but I need you.

Yes, you are young and inexperienced, but I will equip you with everything you need.

Yes, it's overwhelming, but I am with you.

God replies not only to major prophets but to our feelings of doubt, inadequacy and fear too. And God's answer is the same "yes...but..." that Jeremiah heard back in the day.

Yes, you may not have power or wealth to move mountains, but you have a voice and you have a vote.

Yes, you may not be able to cure cancer or depression, but you can be present, you can listen, you can love.

Yes, you may be overwhelmed by the need around you, but I am God and I am with you....always.

Like Jeremiah, we too have been formed by God and called to service. Through our small and large actions we can partner with God as agents of justice and healing. And, as one commentator reminds us, "When we are called as individuals or congregations into the service of God's word and way, God's passion for goodness and wholeness becomes our passion as well, taking shape amid the specific realities of the contexts where we bear witness."² And so we step out in faith too, aware of the need of the world while simultaneously holding the good news of a God who loves all of creation, who desires its wholeness—a God who continually engages even the most broken places of our world calling forth new life.

Now I don't know how God speaks to you. I don't know if God calls you in dreams or through text messages of hurting people who are sure that you're the best one to help. I don't know if God calls through that feeling in the pit of your stomach as you watch the nightly news or through the story of a friend.

But I do know that God calls. God has called me through a friend's invitation, God has called me through a musical performance I watched, God has called me through relationships with people who are very different from me. God has called me through my fears and insecurities. God has called me by challenging my own ideas of what I thought life would be like. God has called me through tears and through great joy.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary – Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16)

So my challenge is this: listen up. God is calling you. God has not given up on us, nor has God given up on any corner of this world. God desires wholeness, justice, peace, and steadfast love. So listen up. God is calling and equipping YOU this day. God needs YOU. God needs your gifts and your questions and what little energy you have left. God needs your hope and your dedication and your willingness to stretch. God needs your courage and your voice, your ideas and your insights and the benefit of your experience.

And remember that God's promise—to each one of us—is to always be bigger than our doubts, our limitations, our fears, the systems of this world that oppress or deny, our past failures and present anxieties.

Whatever you throw at God, and whatever is thrown at you, know that God is with you, always...preparing, equipping, supporting, encouraging, calling...so that you all—we all—can make a difference in this world. Thanks be to God.

Amen.