

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10

*"The Master was searching for a vessel to use;
On the shelf there were many—which one would He choose?
Take me, cried the gold one, I'm shiny and bright,
I'm of great value and I do things just right.
My beauty and luster will outshine the rest
And for someone like You, Master, gold would be the best!
Unheeding, the Master passed on to the brass,
It was wide mouthed and shallow, and polished like glass.
Here! Here! cried the vessel, I know I will do,
Place me on Your table for all men to view.
Look at me, called the goblet of crystal so clear,
My transparency shows my contents so dear,
Though fragile am I, I will serve You with pride,
And I'm sure I'll be happy Your house to abide.
The Master came next to a vessel of wood,
Polished and carved, it solidly stood.
You may use me, dear Master, the wooden bowl said,
But I'd rather You used me for fruit, not for bread!
Then the Master looked down and saw a vessel of clay.
Empty and broken it helplessly lay.
No hope had the vessel that the Master might choose,
To cleanse and make whole, to fill and to use.
Ah! This is the vessel I've been hoping to find,
I will mend and use it and make it all Mine.
I need not the vessel with pride of itself;
Nor the one who is narrow to sit on the shelf;
Nor the one who is big-mouthed and shallow and loud;
Nor one who displays his contents so proud;
Not the one who thinks he can do all things just right;
But this plain earthy vessel filled with My power and might.
Then gently He lifted the vessel of clay.
Mended and cleansed it and filled it that day.
Spoke to it kindly. "There's work you must do,
Just pour out to others as I pour into you."—Unknown*

God calls us—all of us—knowing what we are capable of doing. Today's scripture reading takes us back to the moments when God called Jeremiah to become a prophet. We find that Jeremiah had some real apprehensions about whether God had the right guy for the job. We read, in fact, that he told God he had the wrong guy, "Why, I'm not a good communicator, I'm only a boy, and no one will listen to me."

God saw right through that. By the way, Jeremiah was not the first one to give the excuse he could not speak. Moses, who was called by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, also tried to explain to God that he wasn't the right person for the job because he couldn't speak. But God fixed that problem by getting Moses' brother Aaron to help.

In all fairness to Jeremiah, serving as a prophet was not going to be an easy job. Prophets were not usually popular people because they were communicators, most often, of God's displeasure with His people's behavior and lack of faithfulness. They would speak of God's judgement and warn them of bad things that would happen if they did not change their ways. No one wants to be the bearer of bad news, including Jeremiah, but the people of God were wavering in their faithfulness to God.

And, trying times were on the horizon for God's children, which would only be worsened if they were not following God's lead. The year was 627 BC. Centuries earlier, Israel had endured civil unrest, which in turn caused the nation to split into two different kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Josiah was king over Judah where he had been reigning for the past thirteen years. Although history now recognizes Josiah as a respectable king who "did what was right in the LORD's eyes" (2 Kgs 22:2), the nation he was responsible for leading was headed for utter destruction.

The nearby nation of Babylon was quickly gaining strength, and God's people—the people God had chosen to be his very own special people out of all the nations in the world, didn't seem content with following the God who had made a covenant with them. You've likely heard the line from Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." For Judah, it was simply the worst of times. What's more, it was about to get even worse in the ensuing years. It is into this context that Jeremiah received his call from God.

I find it interesting that there are people today who say the Bible has no relevancy to our times. The contexts of the stories are very different from the times we are living in today. I would disagree. Throughout history we have enjoyed good times, times of peace, safety, and prosperity, and we have endured times of recession, war, and civil unrest.

We get comfortable in the good times, and quite frankly, that's when we find church attendance drop off, perhaps because people don't feel a need for God. I know that sounds harsh, but the indicators, like church attendance, for one, seem to say that. Then when the dark times come, people ask, "where's God?" and they turn to God, looking for help. That happened after 9/11. People returned to churches and they turned back to God. This really is the same kind of cycle the Israelites found themselves in over and over. We ask, why don't they see the cycle and break the cycle? We could ask ourselves the same thing.

Don't we have any prophets today, who warn us of what is to come if we continue down a path driven by self-centeredness, prejudice and greed, instead of living out the covenant we have with God to love and worship God with heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves? I would argue that we indeed do have present day prophets. We just don't open ourselves to seeing them as such, because we forget that God still calls people today for a variety of tasks, such as prophecy, for building his kingdom.

In many ways, all Christians are called to be prophets as we point the way to Christ. Through our everyday words and our actions, we have the opportunity to declare God's reign in our world. Christians challenge the world to put God first in our lives, rather than what feels good and benefits them. Christians call people to an accountability before God who commands us to love and respect others. So, again, I would argue that all Christians are called to serve as prophets to some degree. We may be called to do it in a variety of ways, depending upon our talents.

But, like Jeremiah was initially, and really, at other times when he got frustrated as he tried to do his job, do we have apprehensions about stepping out and communicating God's message, however God directs us to do that, to all people? Do we ask, "Am I really the right

person for the job, God?" Or do we flat out say to God, "You've got to be kidding God. I can't do that! I don't have the right stuff to do that!"

What is it that gets in the way of Christians stepping out in faith to answer God's particular call on their lives to take God's message of salvation and love to the world around them? Have you felt nudges from God pressing on your heart to do something in particular, yet you've not stepped out to do it? Why? What's holding you back?

Jeremiah lacked confidence in himself. That's a lot of the problem for many Christians. The thing is, God has confidence in us even when we don't have confidence in ourselves. God knows what we are capable of doing to accomplish a task. God knows us better than we know ourselves.

While I love the reference made here in the opening verse of today's text to Psalm 139:16, it's kind of like the ace card that God pulled out of his pocket, saying, "I, God, knew you and everything about you before you were even born. I know what you are capable of doing! Oh, and by the way, I gave you the gifts to do what I am asking." Should it surprise us then to know that if God knows everything about us, God also knows the real reasons behind our excuses for not pursuing His direction for our lives? That can be and probably should be a little unsettling to some people.

While God has all the confidence in the world in our abilities to accomplish what He needs us to do, I believe God is sensitive to our feeling of fear, another feeling that makes people question whether they want to do what God asks. But, just like God told Jeremiah not to be afraid of failure or of what people may think or say in response to Jeremiah and the message he would share, God tells us not to be afraid. God goes even further to say, "I will be with you, you won't be doing this alone."

We read in Matthew 28:19-20 that Jesus, having been given authority by God over heaven and earth, said the same thing to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

We have an amazing team, God the Father, Jesus the Savior, and the Holy Spirit, to walk with us and help us as we take God's message and love to the world. We are not promised the road will be easy, without risks and pitfalls, but we will have help. When our apprehensions threaten to overtake our willingness to respond positively to God's call, we can hold on to this promise and step out in faith, one step at a time, gaining confidence with each step we take.

In a sermon a pastor named David Richardson asked, "Have you ever stepped on ground that seemed unsteady, but you really had to go on, just to get where you were going?"

He went on to tell this story,

"Just recently we took a trip up to the (northern part of South Korea) Hwacho 'n area and then down to the Chuncho 'n areas. We stopped at a nice restaurant where they had those outside gazebo kind of things. We had our steamed chicken in herbs beside a flowing stream. The flowing water, the setting, and the dragonflies buzzing over the corn across the stream, all added to the taste of this meal.

"Well, after we finished, the ladies decided they wanted to wade or walk in the stream. There was a very small sand bar, or bank, in the middle of the stream, while the rest was pebbles and rocks. One of the ladies cautiously stepped over to the sand bar. She didn't put all of her weight in that first step, wary that she would sink in the sand. Then a little more weight, a little more weight, until she was standing on the small sand bar. Then, she took another step with the

same apprehension, the same hesitation. She found out it was solid and able to support her, and she then began walking around without a care in the world about the sand bar. The apprehensive thoughts disappeared and she began to focus on what was around her. In faith she stepped out, and she realized and rejoiced that the ground was able to support her."

In a way, that's faith—faith that the ground, or the task, in the ministry you are called to—God will support you. That's what we do in ministry. We step out. Sometimes that first step is hard, shaky, or uncertain, but we take it anyway because we trust and have faith in God. Do you trust God? Do you trust that God will be with you and help you with that which he has every confidence in you to do? If you're not trusting God, you'll never take that first step? Are you willing to step out to answer God's call? Our world, near and far, needs us to step up to the plate for God, to be prophets in some form, using our God-given talents, to lead them back to God. Amen.