



A SEVERE MERCY

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 Jeremiah 1:6-19
 Second Message
 John Hanneman
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I want to begin this morning by suggesting a headline that CNN might well have been reporting had that news organization been covering events in the Middle East in 627 B.C.:

Good morning, and welcome to the a.m. edition of the news for January 9th, 627 B.C.

Our top story this morning comes out of Anathoth, where a young teenager claims that God has spoken to him and touched his mouth with a message for the people of Israel. Jeremiah, the son of Amon, is a recent graduate of Anathoth High School and was planning on attending the University of Cairo next year. Now he says he will stay in the area, attend the New Jerusalem Community College, and be a prophet to Judah. In an interview with CNN, the young Jeremiah said: "God has told me that a great judgment is coming on our people unless we repent and worship Yahweh." When reporters tried talking to Jeremiah's parents, his father replied simply, "No comment," while his mother said, "Our son has always been a bit strange and has kept to himself a lot lately." One has to wonder why God would choose a young boy to communicate such an important message to his people if Yahweh were really serious.

In other news this morning, King Josiah was in Hebron last weekend where he demolished an ancient Canaanite worship center. As he sent giant stones down the hillside he was heard to yell, "We must clear all Canaanite deities from our land!" One resident of Hebron was outraged by the whole incident. In an interview with the Jerusalem Post, she said, "This young upstart king doesn't know what he is doing. All this talk about Moses and Joshua, trying to get back to traditional values. He doesn't realize that the culture we live in now has progressed far beyond these archaic ideas. People need to be free to do what they think is right." At least King Josiah is remaining true to his campaign promises.

In foreign news, Jacob Steinway, the head of the foreign policy committee, will be in Cairo this week where he will be negotiating a long-term agreement with Egypt helping to protect Judah's northern border from Assyria.

In other foreign news it is reported that the Babylonian army has doubled in size this past year and is testing a new long-range flame-throwing capability. The new flame-thrower would out-distance the current Assyrian P70 by 100 meters.

The weather today for southern Palestine will be mostly fair and sunny, with a high of 90 degrees in Beersheba. And in sports, the Judah Jaguars were trounced by the the Ashkelon Angels in rock throwing, 3 games to none. That is the news for today, January 9th. Good morning.

In 627 B.C. the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, a young teenage boy living "in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin" (1:1). Last week, in 1:4-5, we looked at God's initial word to Jeremiah and his appointment of the youth as a prophet to the nations. How will Jeremiah respond? What will be God's message through him? And what assurance will the young prophet have that he will be safe and secure in his role as a spokesman for God? In 1:6 we find Jeremiah's initial response to the word of God:

**Then I said, "Alas, LORD God!
 Behold, I do not know how to speak,
 Because I am a youth." (Jer 1:6, NASB)**

Jeremiah responds in the same way that Moses answered when God's call came to him—with great reluctance (Exod 4:10-13). Jeremiah feels incapable, inadequate, incomplete and incompetent. He has no natural qualifications to lead, speak or act on God's behalf.

God creates and calls each one of us and gives us to the nations unto a life of ministry. But, as we contemplate our talents and qualifications we respond like Jeremiah and Moses: we shrink back because we feel insecure and inadequate. But we will never feel prepared for the major things of life. We are never fully prepared to get married, become parents, take on a new job, or die. We will never feel adequate to share the gospel, teach a Bible study or be a prophet. We think we are too young, too old, too tired, too weak or too busy.

But the people whom God uses most are the very ones who think they have the least to offer. In fact, when someone thinks he has what it takes, as far as Christian ministry is concerned at least, that should be a cause for concern. It is an indication that he feels too confident in his own abilities. Qualifications don't matter to God—and they shouldn't matter to us, either. Eugene Peterson writes:

There is an enormous gap between what we think we can do and what God calls us to do. Our ideas of what we can do or want to do are trivial; God's ideas for us are grand. It is not our feelings that determine our level of participation in life, nor our experience

that qualifies us for what we will do and be; it is what God decides about us. God does not send us into the dangerous and exacting life of faith because we are qualified; he chooses us in order to qualify us for what he wants us to be and do.¹

So Jeremiah doesn't feel up to the task. In response, God encourages him with a series of promises, instructions and signs. Verses 7-10:

**But the LORD said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am a youth,'
Because everywhere I send you, you shall go,
And all that I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of them,
For I am with you to deliver you," declares the
LORD.**

**Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched
my mouth, and the LORD said to me,**

**"Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.
See, I have appointed you this day over the nations
and over the kingdoms,
To pluck up and to break down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant." (1:7-10)**

First, God assures Jeremiah of his very presence, declaring that he will be able to speak everything that he gives him to speak. Jeremiah has no need to fear. God assures him, "For I am with you to deliver you." The word means to rescue, save, snatch away or free from the firm grip of distress. Jeremiah seems always to have been in distress, but God never removed him from tough situations. He saved him by being with him.

When God calls us, and he will, our first reaction is to think about who we are. But that is not where we should begin. God wants us to think about who he is. We may be completely accurate in our assessment of ourselves, but that is beside the point. God never asks us to do something without giving us what we need to accomplish it. Whatever we lack naturally he gives to us supernaturally. Whatever we do not possess he imparts to us.

When God calls us to a ministry then, the question we should ask ourselves is not, "Who am I to do this?" but, "Where is my post and what are my instructions?" The apostle Paul tells us where we find our confidence for the task to which we are called, "And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Cor 3:4-5).

Next, God touches Jeremiah's and gives him his assignment. Touch is important to God. He is not a distant being who communicates through e-mail. He touches us through people and through his Spirit. When we feel his touch we know that he is near and we are encouraged as a result. We see this in the life of Jesus, in his tears--in his anointing with oil, in his wash-

ing of the feet of the disciples, in his breaking bread.

God touches Jeremiah in order to put his word on his lips. We never have to dream up what God wants us to say. We speak what he puts in our mouths. When my wife feels drawn to share the gospel with someone, she always tells me later, "I was speaking and I didn't know where the words were coming from." It is the Spirit who prompts us when we speak.

God is very specific with Jeremiah about the word that he wants him to speak to Judah, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. He commissions the prophet, using six verbs, four of which speak of demolition: to pluck up, to break down, to destroy, to overthrow; and two of renewal: to build and to plant (see Jer 31:28). Notice that all six verbs involve agriculture and architecture. Jeremiah's assignment is to tell the people of Israel that there will be great judgment, followed by renewal.

"Pluck up" is used of a root or a plant that is pulled out of the ground. Israel was a choice vine brought out of Egypt and planted in the land, but now she will be uprooted. Her walls will be broken down, her cities destroyed, her fortifications overthrown. But after that will come rebuilding and replanting.

In 627 B.C., Israel stood on the brink of the Exile, the great divide of the nation's history. In forty years the walls of Jerusalem would be destroyed and the inhabitants of Judah deported to Babylon. God would uproot Judah, but after a time he would bring hope and renewal. God would bring Judah back and plant her again. According to Walter Brueggemann in his book, *Interpreting the Prophets*, this theme of uprooting and planting "articulates God's decisive judgment and God's resilient hope." There would be harsh endings followed by amazing beginnings.

This was how God worked with Israel and it is how he works with his people, his church, today. He tears us, breaks us and pulls down everything in our lives that is not from him, judging our sin and idolatry. Nothing we do can stop his work. All our schemes for protection and immunization and guarantees cannot withstand God's refining fire. But then, after he replants and rebuilds, what grows is pure and holy and good. It is a painful process, but in the end we will know that God is building his temple. Paul picks up this language of Jeremiah when he says in Ephesians: "You...are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph 2:19-22).

Next, God gives Jeremiah two signs that will equip him for life and ministry. Verses 11-16:

And the word of the LORD came to me saying, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said, "I see a rod of an almond tree." Then the LORD said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to per-

form it.” And the word of the LORD came to me a second time saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.” Then the LORD said to me, “Out of the north the evil will break forth on all the inhabitants of the land. For, behold, I am calling all the families of the kingdoms of the north,” declares the LORD; “and they will come, and they will set each one his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all its walls round about, and against all the cities of Judah. And I will pronounce My judgments on them concerning all their wickedness, whereby they have forsaken Me and have offered sacrifices to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. (1:11-16)

The first sign is a branch of an almond tree. This is a play on words. Almond means “wakeful,” which is very close in meaning and spelling to the word watch that is used in verse 12. The almond is the first tree to greet the spring, a sign that is repeated year after year. Everything may seem dormant, but God is watching, waiting for his moment to burst forth and fulfill his word. When Jeremiah saw the blossom on the almond tree he would anticipate not just spring, but the fulfillment of God’s word, the judgment that was fast approaching.

Next, God gives a second sign, that of a boiling, seething pot. This is a reference to Babylon. Judgment will come from the north, from Babylon. God will tip a pot of boiling water and a torrent of scalding water, a flash flood, will engulf the land and burn everything it touches. The armies of Babylon will use the old invasion route of the Assyrians, the ancient road that ran down past Mt. Hermon and into the land, to wreak havoc upon Judah.

This sign seems rather vague to Jeremiah. This is a poetic vision, not a political analysis. But even though the sign is vague, the reason for God’s judgment is not. The issue is theological and moral in nature. Judah has done evil. The people had forsaken the LORD, burned sacrifices to other gods and bowed down to the work of their hands. Because Judah has done evil, so Yahweh will send evil upon Judah.

What does this mean for Jeremiah? God has a final word for him:

“Now, gird up your loins, and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, lest I dismay you before them. Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city, and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land. And they will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you,” declares the Lord. (1:17-19)

Verse 17 actually begins with the words, “as for you.” Jeremiah will be the exception. (Baruch is singled out in

similar fashion in chapter 45.) Jeremiah is commanded to get dressed for battle: “Get ready to speak, Jeremiah. This will be a fearful thing. You will have to stand all alone, but do not be dismayed. Just speak my word.”

God again gives his promise to Jeremiah. All of Judah will fight against him, but he will prevail. God contrasts the fate of Jeremiah with the future of Jerusalem. No matter what Judah does the people will not be able to save or protect Jerusalem. But Jeremiah will be a fortified city. He will not be overcome; he will prevail because God will be with him to deliver him. This is the same promise that God made to him in verse 8.

Jeremiah is given a tough assignment, but God appears to him in a powerful way to speak to him, touch him, bless him and gave him signs. What would life hold for Jeremiah? Would he be a Sir Lancelot or a General Patton, strengthened to face every situation? Would he ride the wave of success in the face of difficult times? Would he live an exciting life and have a dramatic ministry, never doubting or fearing? Far from it.

Here is the ironic twist. God calls Jeremiah to ministry and yet his life will be filled with pain, doubt, anxiety, depression, fear, anger and hopelessness. He will be rejected, persecuted, mistreated, misunderstood and mishandled. He will be called the weeping prophet, the one who was always overwhelmed by his emotions. Listen to how he describes himself:

**Why has my pain been perpetual
And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?
(15:18)**

**O LORD, Thou hast deceived me and I was deceived;
Thou hast overcome me and prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day long;
Everyone mocks me.
For each time I speak, I cry aloud;
I proclaim violence and destruction,
Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted
In reproach and derision all day long. (20:7,8)**

He even curses the day he is born, like Job:

**Cursed be the day when I was born;
Let the day not be blessed when my mother bore me!
Cursed be the man who brought the news
To my father, saying, “A baby boy has been born to you!”
And made him very happy.
But let that man be like the cities
Which the LORD overthrew without relenting,
And let him hear an outcry in the morning
And a shout of alarm at noon;
Because he did not kill me before birth,
So that my mother would have been my grave,
And her womb ever pregnant.
Why did I ever come forth from the womb
To look on trouble and sorrow,
So that my days have been spent in shame? (20:14-18)**

Compare these expressions of anguish with God's opening word to him in 1:4, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.*" Jeremiah was God's perfect, special, well thought-out creation, planned from the beginning of time, and yet the prophet would cry out in pain, wishing he had never come forth from his mother's womb.

I was reminded of Jeremiah when I watched the movie "The Green Mile." John Coffey is a hulking, gigantic figure who feels the pain and suffering of people around him. He sees hurt and hatred and evil. He is misunderstood and falsely accused. He wants to heal and to be used by God but life is so painful for him he would rather die than feel that pain. This is what life was like for Jeremiah.

I can relate to him. Perhaps you can, too. Jeremiah was not a self-assured leader. He was timid, reluctant, rebellious, sensitive and introspective. His most appealing quality may well have been his humanness. In this man we recognize the reality of life and ministry. This is the tension we face as God's people. We have been chosen and called. We have an eternal purpose. Everything about us has meaning. And yet, much of the time these realities seem very far from our experience. We wonder why we were born. We even curse the day of our birth. We feel we have missed God's will for our life. But Jeremiah's experience demonstrates that we are where God wants us to be. We can live content with two competing realities: we are fortified cities, touched by God, hand-picked to do amazing things, but we often feel neglected, unloved, rejected and depressed.

This was Paul's experience, too, as he shared in 2 Corinthians:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:7-12)

What has God called you to do? Of one thing you may be sure: you will never feel prepared for the task. You will always feel inadequate. Yet God promises, "I will be with you to be your confidence."

Has God given you a tough assignment? Has he asked you to speak difficult words, to live in a difficult marriage or family, to endure a painful illness? To you God says, "I will be with you to be your strength."

Has life's journey made you weary? Are you languishing in the depths of depression and loneliness? Do you wish you had never been born? To you God says, "I will be with you to comfort you."

Have you lost hope? Have you seen the things to which you have given your life broken and destroyed? To you God says, "I will be with you to rebuild and replant."

Are you afraid of what people will do to you? To you God says, "I will be with you to make you a fortified city."

God doesn't stop the fight; he stands by the fighter. We may be thin-skinned, but God will wrap us in heavy metal. Jeremiah endured forty years of living in painful and lonely isolation, yet his life reflected a wonderful obedience to what God called him to do. That is why, by the grace of God, he could say:

**The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is Thy faithfulness. (Lam 3:22-23)**

**For the LORD will not reject forever,
For if He causes grief,
Then He will have compassion
According to His abundant lovingkindness.
(Lam 3:31-33)**

Amen.

1. Eugene Peterson, *Run With The Horses* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1983) 50.

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