

January 31, 2010 – Epiphany 4C

Jeremiah 1:4-10

DO NOT SAY, "I AM ONLY..."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, "I am only a boy, ... for I am with you to deliver you."

The story is told about a man who climbs to the top of a mountain. He's wondering, can God really hear me from up here? So he shouts, "God, what should I do with my life?" And God answers him: "Feed the hungry, strive for justice, work for peace." It's not the answer he wants to hear. So he shouts again, "It's ok, God, I was just testing." And God replies, "I know, my son, so was I."

The prophet Jeremiah was a man who was regularly tested in his relationship with God. It seems that Jeremiah believed that God was always asking him to do things which were quite unpopular with the leaders of that time. Things which seemed to go against Jeremiah's tradition. A tradition that had been handed down from previous generations. And furthermore, in Jeremiah's mind, God was not always clear about what God wanted. Jeremiah is seen by many as being the person best suited to be the prophet for the church of today.

His career took place during one of the most chaotic times in ancient Israel. International structures were collapsing around Judah. Accepted social and religious beliefs were being challenged. The old ways of doing things were no longer seen to be acceptable. People were clamoring for change. So it is that the book of Jeremiah, on the one hand, presupposes some sort of tradition, but on the other hand criticizes and works against that same tradition.

The call that came to Jeremiah was unlike any other call. Jeremiah was not at all like Moses tending sheep out in the wilderness and looking up and seeing a burning bush. Not at all like Isaiah with his vision of the Lord, "high and lifted up." Not like Gideon's encounter with an angel. Not like Samuel hearing the voice of God in the middle of the night. Not like Mary being confronted by an angel and being told that she was going to have a baby.

And furthermore, Jeremiah was never given a choice. His call came from a time when he was still in his mother's womb.

Why, then, is it seen by many that Jeremiah was a prophet who would be well suited for today's church?

We, too, have our traditions and we couldn't get along very well without them. Some of us look with nostalgia to that which is past, and we wish these days could come back again. Yet we are often critical of these same traditions. We criticize the very things that we long for. Every mainline church today is struggling with questions. How can we worship in a way that is authentic to who we are and at the same time be attractive to a new generation of people who have stopped attending church because they no longer find the old ways to be relevant? How can we respond to contemporary issues in a way that honors scripture and tradition as well as the modern-day problems that we face?

Jeremiah reminds us that if we are going to have anything to pass on to our children we must live in faithful tension with the traditions that have brought us to this day. We can't throw out our traditions like Monday morning garbage, but neither can we endlessly continue to fall back on them, doing the same old things and repeating the same old words.

Our church families tend to grow through nurture. Children are born into faithful families and they are nurtured and raised in those faithful families. That does not mean that we don't value those who have "Damascus road experiences." Of course we do. But many of us have simply grown up in the faith and we've been nurtured and encouraged by our church-going parents and other relatives until their faith became our faith. We may very well have had our own important experiences of the presence and the grace of God, times when we have chosen to be who we are and not something else. Some people are a little bit intimidated if they don't have a Pentecostal, Damascus Road, conversion experience. But Jeremiah reminds us that God has many different ways of forming and shaping people. It's ok for you to be who you are. And it's also ok for someone else to be different.

Jeremiah spends much time struggling with self-doubt. We talked about doubt in our Bible Study last Tuesday. Doubt is a normal part of believing in God. Jeremiah wonders how he can be a prophet. How will he know if he is doing the right thing? Are we not the same way? Don't we, too, struggle with the very same traditions that have brought us here in the first place? Sometimes we keep on saying the same words and reading the same stories and singing the same hymns, and saying the same prayers until they become as comfortable as an old sweater. And sometimes we change them for new and more modern ways and words. But always we struggle and always we wonder what it is that God requires of us.

We have been conditioned to feel unworthy, and we voice our feelings just like the prophets of old voiced their feelings. Isaiah said, "I am a person of unclean lips." Moses said, "I am a person of slow speech." Gideon said, "My clan is the weakest clan in Manassa." And Jeremiah said, "Oh, Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

And Joan said, "I can't teach in the Sunday School. I don't have any teacher training." And David said, "I can't fix the leaky roof, I have no roofing experience." And Hazel said, "I can't be on the Church Board, I don't know the rules and regulations." And Harry said, "I can't join the choir because I can't sing well enough." And Mary said, "I can't give anything to help the hungry because I'm on a fixed income." And George said, "I can't read in church. I couldn't stand up and speak in front of all those people.

And God said, "Don't say, 'I am only...'"

"You shall do whatever I command you."

Why God? How God?

"Because I will be with you to deliver you."

Let us all ask ourselves the question: "How will I respond to God?"

Amen.