



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## **Only a Boy**

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

August 22, 2010

*Twenty First Sunday (Year C)*

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

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The word of the Lord came to me saying, “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.” 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 you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God!**

Several years ago I got a call from the nominating committee of the parent teacher board at my children's elementary school. The woman on the other end of the phone, whom I didn't know, asked me if I would be willing to serve as an officer on the board for the coming year. I was a bit taken aback; my children had been students at the school for just a little over six months – and I hadn't yet been to a parent's meeting.

I was rather puzzled; since I didn't know the job, I had no confidence in my ability to do it, and what's more, I had no confidence the woman asking knew enough about me to be know whether I would do a good job! Strangely enough, I declined, citing a desire to get involved with the board – or a least check out a meeting - before taking office.

It makes a difference, doesn't it? When someone knows us and our abilities, it is much more likely that we'll say yes to a position or responsibility. How can we be asked to do something when our gifts, skills, reliability, priorities – or anything else about us – are unknown? How can we have confidence that the request has meaning or reflects a value of responsibility, if the asker doesn't know who we are?

It is just this point that provides a powerful entre into Jeremiah's word to us today.

Jeremiah had a fairly long career; he began as a young man, when Josiah was king, (around 626 bce) and continued through the fall of Jerusalem some 40 years later. He was called to be God's mouth-piece to a people that had forgotten who they were supposed to be and what they were supposed to do. His career was notable, not just for its length, but for the many ways he tried to call the people to the right and faithful worship of God.

But despite his efforts, both the court and the people resisted his prophetic word. The reforms that King Josiah instituted didn't endure; and Josiah's sons and grandson were corrupt and oppressive kings, even as Jeremiah continued to preach reform and repentance. After Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, Jeremiah spent his last years in Egypt.

Given all of that, we can certainly understand why Jeremiah's first words to God were ones of protest! While he couldn't have known all that would take place in his career, the stage he was being asked to enter had already been set. Being called into God's prophetic service must have seemed fraught with peril as he considered what it would mean for him.

God began the conversation with Jeremiah by clarifying the foundation for the call:

*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.*

God says: I know you from the inside out: all that you are – and all that you aren't – and I want you to speak for me.

What an amazing foundation for a call to serve: God knows us fully - what we can and can't do – and calls us anyway! God knows those things about us we haven't shared with everyone. God knows the fears that lay just below the surface in our lives. God knows the challenges we have in our relationships with other people. God knows the heartache that keeps us just this side of stepping out. God knows our biases and frustrations, our failings and excuses. God knows all about us, and yet God continues to open doors of ministry and service.

But as amazing as this revelation may be, it wasn't enough. Jeremiah didn't jump at the opportunity to speak out against the social norms of the day *or* predict the dire consequences of Jerusalem's captivity *or* get on the radar of kings who might not agree with his religious views. And, why would he? He was, after all, *just a kid*.

*“Ah, Lord God!  
Truly I do not know how to speak,  
for I am only a boy.”*

Jeremiah may not have quite picked up on God's point when God said: *“I know you!”*

Jeremiah's age and abilities were well known to the one who was shaping and calling him into service. Yet, who wouldn't offer such a protest? Who among us would feel prepared at any age, let alone a youthful one, to undertake such an awesome responsibility?

Patrick and I discovered we were expecting our first child after being married less than a year. I was still a student at Pittsburgh Seminary; Patrick was serving in an internship position after just graduating. Despite the delightful surprise that Connall was, we were ill-prepared to be parents at that stage in our lives.

Over the course of the next several months, we pulled together all the things we would need for Connall's arrival so that by the time he was born we had all the essentials. By all visible counts, we were prepared.

Connall's arrival began the night before he was born, and he arrived about six hours after we got to the hospital. Everything about his arrival was 'textbook.' The doctor and nurses looked him over thoroughly, doing all those 'checks' that are done on a newborn. Eventually Connall was swaddled and placed in my arms, and he was, of course, the most beautiful baby ever born – to that date.

Over the next two days, nurses showed us how to change his diaper, swaddle him properly, give him a bath, feed and burp him. Each time they worked with Connall they moved him easily, with experienced, yet careful motions.

Less than 48 hours after he was born, we were on our way home with our son. We took this tiny, dependent, newborn out of the hospital – out of the hands of the people who were experienced and wise. Armed only with discharge instructions and the phone number to the nursery, we were on our way. As we were leaving I wondered, *how can two completely inexperienced young people have total responsibility for such a vulnerable life?* Two days of instruction hardly seemed enough.

*I felt like crying out "But we are 'only kids';  
we can't do this alone!"*

And of course, we haven't.

God told Jeremiah he would be equipped for the call. God promised and gave him the words he would need to grow into the awesome task of delivering the prophetic word. And, God promised to stay with him. The word of God goes forth, but not without the God who gives it.

Nearly 20 years later, Connall seems to have survived, as have his two sisters, equally as beautiful, who arrived a few years later. We have grown into the awesome task of parenting, not perfectly, for sure, but over the years God has continued to equip us for the call to parent our children.

*I am only a youth... I'm not worthy... I am a man of unclean lips...*

These simple phrases come to all of us, in some form, at one time or another. And with good reason – they're true! Jeremiah was young! He probably hadn't learned how to speak in public, much less to powerful people. Without a doubt he stumbled over words, faced the crowds with fear and trepidation, questioned his skill and effectiveness as a prophet. But God hadn't been looking for a refined, experienced speaker to be his prophet. He knew what Jeremiah was all about even before he was born, and called him, knowing he would have to make him a prophet, equipping him to respond to that call.

Those words of protest we utter at God's call to us are also true – but they aren't the stopping point for God. Rather, they are the starting point for God to use us in a new way and equip us for the task at hand.

We've all said 'yes' to things because nobody else would, and if we didn't the team, the class, the program couldn't go on. And, we've probably muddled along, declaring: never again!

But consider the experience of being called to do something because there's a quality in you that has been seen by another – a quality you, yourself, might not have even have known was there. Moments like that provide windows into what God sees when he looks at us – a view that goes beyond who we are right now. Those moments are powerful reminders that though we are loved just as we are, God's love empowers us to move into who we can be.

Jeremiah was called to something that was hard, probably dangerous at points, and, ultimately unsuccessful – if we were measuring by results. The people and kings as well, rejected his words. But with a different measure, he was very successful. Jeremiah was called to hold the people of God accountable to what was right. God says ‘I appoint you...’

*“...to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.”*

Jeremiah’s prophetic message would be hard on the people and their leaders, condemning their lifestyles and faithless ways while painting a picture of a bleak future. And, what’s worse, his work would ultimately not inspire the lasting changes needed.

This is the hard reality about following where God leads. The measure of success will not always be reflected in what we can see. The bottom line may not be what we hope it will be.

But faithfulness is an end in itself. To have the conviction that we have done what we believe God called us to do is an extraordinary experience, despite what may come. The words we’ve read from Jeremiah reflect this. His prophetic ministry endures even if, at the time of his career, Jerusalem still fell and the exile still happened. The prophecy of Jeremiah bears fruit as we draw on his word and experience in our time.

God’s promise to Jeremiah: that he does not go into this new thing alone, is undergirded by God’s intimate activity in Jeremiah’s life. These are the qualities of God’s love that sustain each of us as well – wherever God leads us. As we offer a blessing on the beginning of a new school year, we can take confidence that God meets us right where we are and will lead us through each day.

*Let us pray,*

*O God, our cries of protest reflect who we know ourselves to be right now.*

*Give us a vision of where you are leading us so that, relying on your strength we live fully into your call. Through Christ, Amen.*