

Sermon: August 21, 2022 – Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Rev Greg Wooley, preached at Rundle Memorial United Church in Banff

I start today's sermon with a trigger warning, and a promise. Some difficult things will get named at the start of the sermon... and I promise that the whole message won't be that heavy!

Watch at https://youtu.be/HcctTk_Gnqo

There are times when we are called to do hard things: things we feel unprepared for, things we don't want to do or are too busy to do well and would want to hand off to someone else, and things we would rather that nobody had to do.

Historically, I think of 80 years ago, and the landing at Dieppe. My sense is that few of those young men would have planned that as their aspired goal a few years earlier when they were adolescents. Broadly, I think of all the people who act as caregivers for those needing heavy care, and the amount they give to that. And this past month, people in the Bow Valley have been called to do hard things, things they had not planned to do or wanted to do, but which needed to be done right now. There was "that" shocking email in late July that caused so much hurt and needed so much engagement from the Pride festival planners. And, our hearts are with everyone who knew and loved Ethan Enns-Goneau, whose all-too-brief life was celebrated at Melissa's on Friday. Whenever there is a death out of seasons, there a set of tasks that need attention right now, tasks that no-one expected to be doing for another fifty years at least.

The scripture reading we heard this morning, has for some 2600 years presented a classic motif, perhaps even an archetype, of the negotiated response when one is called to do something that one's not anticipating, not prepared for, and/or just plain don't want to do. It's described in the scripture narrative as a one-off interaction between God and Jeremiah, and sometimes a "call" experience is just like that: a mystical moment in time when a divine agenda is placed before you and needs a committed response. My sense, though, is this call experience of Jeremiah may have been a process that unfolded over a number of weeks, months or years, with the needs of the downtrodden coming clearer and God's urgings toward Jeremiah expressed repeatedly so that the young man could ignore them no longer. Someone needed to confront the powers that be about the injustices of the day, and that someone, it turned out, was going to be this seventeen or eighteen year old who felt completely unready to do so.

For good reason, this text is often used as an entry point to explore one's the way one comes to accept (or decline) a calling in life, but today I feel called in a different direction. Today, I'd like us to wonder out loud what led Jeremiah from no to yes. That might be in relation to a big, life-claiming thing, as it was for him, but it might be a more general exploration about what we do and what we don't do... and either way, it strikes me as timely.

In the scripture, Jeremiah's original objection – "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" – is dealt with sequentially and, perhaps, too easily. First, Jeremiah is reminded that from the first moment, his being, his personhood mattered in a great big way. Call it "being knit together in the womb" by a craftswoman God, or being part of a cosmic intention that calls every living being toward loving purpose, that first assurance was followed by a second assurance: that Jeremiah would not be unsupported. Jeremiah would be given the courage to confront people and leaders who didn't want to be shaken out of their complacency, and he

would be shown how to go deep into his own wisdom and the wisdom of the ages, to confidently find the words and actions demanded by difficult situations. And in addition to these two things, Jeremiah is told the magnitude of his mission; he would be given insights into the plight of his day, particularly the plight of the poorest of the poor, to be able to address these heavy things on an ongoing basis.

That pattern, I think, describes many of the times in life when something that will help others needs doing, and the person needed for the task ends up being you. Moving far, far away from Jeremiah, I'm going to tell a brief story that I hope will invite you to explore your life's story, about a time when something beyond your knowledge and experience needed doing and you moved from an initial NO to an eventual YES.

As a child, I always admired the game of baseball. I was terrible at playing it, but something about it drew me in. So some thirty years later, when our young son showed an interest in baseball, I was happy not only to sign him up, but to show up to practice to do whatever needed doing: chalking the lines, setting out the bases, whatever. Within days, the parents were told that umpires were needed, and nobody wanted to do it. It was a hot NO for me, as well, right off the bat. But training was offered, and someone had to - so off I went. While I was not much better at umpiring than I had been as a player, properly learning the rules, getting some on-diamond experience, listening to and being mentored by experienced coaches, and reaching into a deep-felt love for the game that I'd carried with me since childhood, moved me from NO to YES – and eventually, into coaching for a half-dozen years. There was good reason to say no but I gained so much by saying yes.

Where are the places in your personal history where you have been surprised, by a NO that turned to a YES, and it ended up being a rewarding thing? As you feel comfortable doing so, I'd like you to pair up with someone in the pews, and spend about five minutes sharing that kind of experience and if you can name it, identify what it was that moved you from a NO to a YES. I'll watch the time, and let you know the mid-way point so you both get a chance to talk.

<"neighbour nudge" time lasted about 4.5 minutes...>

Thank you for sharing, and in case nobody else has said so, thank you for those times in life when you have taken on tasks that may have been well outside your comfort zone. (A specific thank you for those things you do on behalf of Ralph Connor and Rundle!) I think that the Jeremiah story, carrying quite a bit of ancient wisdom, identifies three key elements, alluded to earlier, that may have come up in your sharing: (1) God sees aptitudes and abilities in Jeremiah, and affirms those by specifically asking for help. This kind of affirmation – from one's peers, or relatives, from your friends or your employer or even through changed self-talk - is particularly important for anyone who has lived with negativity, or belittling, or traumatic denial of their true self; (2) training is offered! Not exactly umpiring school, but God offers ongoing mentoring for Jeremiah in this task of identifying problems and acting on them; and (3) it is clear the thing that needs doing, matters – at least to someone, to some degree. In rather foreboding closing words, God says to Jeremiah, "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." God calls Jeremiah to the huge job of speaking truth to power and as scary as that is God equips him for that, as it needed doing then and continues to need doing now.

One of the realities that many voluntary organizations are finding, as we attempt to resume somewhat "normal" operations following two years of COVID caution, is that YESes are hard to

come by. Group after group are finding that their core leaders are tired and new volunteers well-nigh impossible to find. As for Church life, as I have spoken informally with clergy and lay leaders from several other congregations, I hear something similar from everyone: while we had thought that getting back to more in-person activities would quickly get us back to where we had been before, in terms of financial givings and volunteer commitment, there is a widespread sag in both finances and volunteers. As in many congregations and volunteer organizations, our leadership team has put in a valiant effort since 2020 and can't add much extra to their dossier, grandparents who have barely seen their kids and grandkids for two years are hopping on planes with greater frequency than I've ever seen before, and, well, I think we may also be out of practice in signing up for things. Not just individual-by-individual, but as a community of faith, things like the accessibility project at Ralph Connor will need a whole bunch of YESes in order address the shortcomings of a building which at present offers several automatic advantages to the able-bodied. And, to make one specific plea, as we move into back-to-back Pride months in September (Canmore) and October (Banff/Lake Louise), we could really use a recharging of our Affirming Committee, to help us live into our commitments to be places of love, safety and full inclusion.

As one who has struggled with personal boundaries for decades, I do need to offer a word of caution for those times when you've been tapped on the shoulder to do something and your deepest wisdom is telling you that the answer needs to be NO: especially if you know deep down that to a YES would be detrimental to your well-being. Sometimes the answer no, or not now, or (I love this answer) "no, but I could ask such-and-such a person if they'd like to", is the correct and faithful answer. Especially at times when there's already a lot on your plate, or your own emotional resources are sagging, there's no benefit to trying to reach past capacity. If it's just a matter of confidence or inexperience, let's see if we can line up some training/mentoring but if your inner safety monitor is saying, "no no no no no", that's got to be respected by you and by whoever's making the request.

In coming weeks we will hear more about Jeremiah and what unfolded after this initial asking, but for now, his move from NO to YES, and the activity of the divine in creating benefit for others by this change in heart, is a good take-home. For your faithful process of assessing needs and determining your role in helping address those needs, and for the important tasks and presence we are called to as communities of faith within the towns in which we live, we give thanks. Amen.

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