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I Am With You: Jeremiah 1.4–12

JOHN YORK

In the Bible class I attended this past Sunday, the group was studying a wonderful book by Scot McKnight entitled *Embracing Grace*. In the particular chapter we had read for discussion, McKnight used the analogy of seasons in our climate and in our lives to talk about the gospel. There are three seasons to a full-bodied gospel, he says, and often individual Christians and sometimes whole church groups end up focused on only one aspect, one season of the gospel story. McKnight's three seasons are Good Friday, Resurrection Morning, and Pentecost—death, resurrection, out-pouring of the Holy Spirit.

McKnight reminds us that it is easy to end up only emphasizing the death of Jesus, talking about atonement and forgiveness of sins. But that neglects life that is promised through resurrection. It neglects the empowering of life by God-presence—God's Spirit dwelling in us. It takes all three seasons to live out the gospel story.

I have been in ministry now for thirty years. As a good baby boomer I have difficulty admitting I'm already fifty-four years old, much less dating myself by claiming to have been in ministry this long. I've often thought there are three seasons to ministry: Hope/Enthusiasm, Despair/Cynicism, and Selling Real Estate! The vast majority of those Bible majors I went to school with—many of whom were far more talented than I—have long since left ministry for one reason or another. I was talking to a minister a couple of weeks ago who has been at it several years more than me. He's now in his sixties. He told me that he would love to come teach our ministry majors all of the stuff that can happen to you if you go into ministry.

As I listened to Glenn Pemberton last night tell stories about the encouragement he received from his grandfather, I couldn't help thinking about my own biography, and the reaction of my parents when I first informed them that I had decided to become a Bible major. They were less than impressed, primarily because my father was a preacher, and at the time had just transitioned to that third season of ministry, Selling Real Estate. The second season of ministry had been brutal. Neither he nor my mother wished to see me endure that.

Not all stories end up in real estate or Wal-Mart management, and I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful that my own father was unlike many of his peers who left ministry; he actually returned to ministry after a few years. But I also realize the clock is ticking on my ministry value in the eyes of my church constituency. The slide toward that dreaded word "retirement" has begun, and let's face it, most of our churches and most of our Christian universities want to hire the next young gun, not an aging boomer. I'm really praying that my tenure application at Lipscomb has been accepted!

I'm also grateful not to know what's coming next, not to have printed somewhere over me the words that form the introduction to this body of material we call Jeremiah. You see we learn things about Jeremiah and his world in these opening three verses that would scare anyone out of ministry before they began—if they knew the rest of the story:

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile (Jer 1.1–3).

From these opening verses, written sometime after the rest of the work as an opening historical marker, we're given the name of our main character, his social location and ministerial pedigree, the historical context for his work, the outcome of his preaching, and his commitment to the task. The beginning is 627 B.C.; the effective end is 586 B.C. Jeremiah is a priest in a lineage of priests, but these are the priests of Anathoth—a group no longer recognized for their service at the temple, but remembered by their forefather Eli and Eli's sons, and by the decision of God himself to use a different family of priests. These are the priests that no one listens to anymore.

The writer of this introduction believes that his audience will recognize the names of Josiah and Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. From the perspective of covenant faithfulness, the vast majority of years in Jeremiah's ministry will be lived in the absolute worst of times and conditions in Jerusalem and Judah. And Jeremiah preaches through these worst of times all the way to the end. He preaches for four decades to people who don't want to hear. Four decades of people despising your presence, wishing you were dead, refusing to hear even though you repeatedly tell them—this really is the word of the LORD.

Not that Jeremiah didn't try to escape his calling in the first place. Our actual text this morning is the famous call passage in chapter one:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?" "I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied. The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled" (Jer 1.4–12).

When I first got here last night, I did what men my age do with greater and greater frequency, which is look for the men's room! I walked in and to my surprise there was a group of teenage boys in there. And I have to admit that the curmudgeon in me immediately reacted badly. "Great!" I thought to myself, "a group of disinterested teens hanging out in the bathroom hoping to escape the lecture." And then I thought about my text for this morning. Most scholars believe that Jeremiah was one of those teenage boys when the word of the LORD came to him, somewhere between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. And for a moment I tried to imagine one of those boys—some kid in the youth group from that family that tells stories about their ancestors in ministry, but none of them is really in ministry anymore. I thought about the idea of God calling people to ministry at the oddest of times and seasons in life.

This calling narrative has certain characteristics that can be found in other stories such as the calling of Moses (although he was ancient in age by comparison), Samuel, and Isaiah. In most cases, the call of God is met by similar resistance. Jeremiah shares with his ancestor Moses the immediate response that God's got the wrong guy here because words do not come easily to him. "I'm too young; I have no talent as a

speaker,” he claims, just as Moses said “I’m too old.” But the LORD immediately begins the reassurance necessary for anyone who takes ministry seriously. It’s not about our words; it is about the vulnerability to allow God’s words’ to be spoken through a life.

Every year at Lipscomb I teach our beginning preaching class. Invariably someone takes the class who already has been told by someone, “You’re going to be a great preacher someday.” It’s like a curse upon them. That’s what they now want to be, a great preacher. I’m convinced that’s never the true call of ministry. The call of ministry is to become a great vessel, to lose oneself in service to a voice that is beyond one’s innate or learned rhetorical skills. That always begins and ends with humility, with an overwhelming sense of not being equal to the task, of feeling like I should get out rather than get in.

But what compels one into ministry is an equally overwhelming sense of relationship. That’s the power of these words in the ears of Jeremiah. The language of God “knowing” Jeremiah before he was born is not an anti-abortion proof-text, it’s the announcement of abiding relationship between Creator God and an eighth grade boy who really isn’t up to the task and has no idea what God is getting him into. Yes there are hints, and those hints are foreboding. The Lord ticks off six verbs to describe this calling, this prophetic life of Jeremiah. Four of them are words of destruction. Two of them are words of construction. Imagine a ministry in which the words of deconstruction and judgment outnumber the words of hope by a ratio of two to one.

As the rest of the chapter unfolds, on two different occasions, God keeps reminding Jeremiah that the words he will speak are not his own, they are the LORD’s. There is even that experiential moment where the LORD is described in human terms, reaching out his hand and (this translation says “touch” but a stronger word is probably called for) hitting him on the mouth as a sign that he, the LORD, will speak through the lips of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is called to speak to the nations. This call is bigger than the people of Judah, because Creator God is always interested in all of his creation.

Just as Jeremiah is to trust that the words he speaks are not his, he also is to trust that God is paying particular attention to everything going on. Just as Jeremiah can look outside and see the almond trees in bloom, so the LORD is watching to see that his word is fulfilled. And twice in the chapter, the LORD reassures Jeremiah that he will be with him to deliver him. Thus the title of my lecture this morning: *I Am With You*.

But it is those very words that become a sticking point for most of us in ministry. Most of us enter ministry believing at least that—that the Lord himself is with us. But there is then a huge gap between what that means for Jeremiah, and what I want it to mean for me this morning or any other day in my ministry. I want my ministry to be defined by people liking me. I want to be able to measure ministry success like the rest of our culture measures success. I just want people to feel good and get along. It would help if everyone understood that I’m always right. I want God’s promise of presence to remove my vulnerability, not exponentially increase it! I want to speak at big churches and big lecture events and have people say all kinds of nice things about me.

We already know from last night’s lecture that the outcomes for Jeremiah won’t be pretty. One of the ironies of his ministry comes in chapter 20 when Jeremiah, in his famous complaint, wishes for the opposite of God’s relational assurance. Here in chapter 1 God says, “I knew you before you were born.” In chapter 20, Jeremiah curses the day he was born! Wishes it had never happened. He is not comforted in that moment by the promise of Yahweh, “I am with you to deliver you.”

Words of critique and judgment are seldom heard as words of love. To speak negatively of the comforts of the moment must mean you really don’t love your heritage. Perhaps the biggest question of the morning is this: Is it possible to love one’s heritage so much that you are not afraid to say the very worst? And if you have the courage to say the worst, do you also then have the courage to stay? But even if you have the courage to stay, will your church let you stay?

Of course, most preachers and most congregations know about “moving sermons”—the ones preached in some effort to be a prophetic voice. Occasionally, a prophet does rise among us. Some of our early

forefathers preached themselves right out of denominations, and signed documents testifying to the death of the name over their church door, willing that their group die and sink into the larger body of Christ. In the 1960s Carl Spain spoke words of prophecy about racism among us, in a setting like today's at Abilene Christian University. It's a much more popular sermon today than it was on that occasion. I've heard of other prophetic voices through the years. My friend Rubel Shelly also spoke about racism at a church in Mississippi the Sunday morning after Martin Luther King was shot. He found out that evening that he had just preached his moving sermon.

But who wants to hear such messages today about our journey into sectarianism, or our turning love into a commodity that is given or held back based on one's right thinking about baptism, or one's commitment to our musical heritage? Who wants to ask the hard questions about what we communicate to more than half our members when they sit through another male-dominated assembly on Sunday morning? Who wants to tell the truth this morning about church politics and the pragmatics of economic necessity in keeping our rich members happy? Who wants to tell the truth about our growing illiteracy when it comes to scripture, much less ask the hard question which is not "what do you read?" but "how do you read?" How much of our doctrine is not God's truth at all, but highly subjective human interpretation? How many of our "right answers" have little to do with being the living presence of Jesus in our world in our time? How much of our own gospel fails to reflect all three seasons of death, resurrection, and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit? No, I have no interest in being a prophet this morning. I have neither Jeremiah's courage nor his stamina.

But I do wonder this morning where the eighth grader is that God has known since before he or she was born. I wonder about all of us who have been in ministry for some time now, caught in the mix of church politics and paycheck and gospel. I wonder about any claim to calling in ministry that is more interested in American definitions of success than in the vulnerability and submission required to be bent and shaped by God in such a way that the gospel can receive a hearing. I wonder about any shortcuts in ministry that offer the promise of bypassing suffering in the name of gospel. The prophet Jeremiah is told from the very beginning that words of hope can only be preached on the far side of suffering. There can't be resurrection with crucifixion. There can't be life without God-presence.

Paul said it this way to the Christians in Rome: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Rom 5.1-5).

There is no shortcut to hope. Authentic calling to mission and ministry always means living beyond our own abilities and inclinations and living into what only God can do. May we hear the sobering words of promise this morning: I AM is with us!

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