

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Raising Prophets

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Rev. Tyler Amundson

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Jeremiah 1:4-10 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁴ The Lord's word came to me:

⁵ "Before I created you in the womb I knew you;
before you were born I set you apart;
I made you a prophet to the nations."

⁶ "Ah, Lord God," I said, "I don't know how to speak
because I'm only a child."

⁷ The Lord responded,
"Don't say, 'I'm only a child.'
Where I send you, you must go;
what I tell you, you must say.

⁸ Don't be afraid of them,
because I'm with you to rescue you,"
declares the Lord.

⁹ Then the Lord stretched out his hand,
touched my mouth, and said to me,
"I'm putting my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ This very day I appoint you over nations and empires,
to dig up and pull down,
to destroy and demolish,
to build and plant."

This past week students started back to school here in Billings. This time of year used to be so exciting to me as a student. New teacher, new books, and new possibility. However, as I learned I was one of the lucky ones who embraced this time of year. Others fear bullying, not meeting someone's expectations (teachers, parents, etc.), not wearing the

“right clothes,” and the list could go on. This time of year is full of new possibility for learning and education, but it also is a time of change and people struggle with change.

However, if you live very long, you know that change is a constant. Our scriptures in the Christian faith point us to this understanding.

Ecclesiastes says “for everything there is a time.” Jesus came to bring change of understanding and to help us see the Kingdom of Heaven was to happen here and now. That is going to involve some change.

There is also something really important that is repeated in the Bible over and over again. “Do not be afraid.” Angels say it to people right before God lets them know something big, God says it to people, and it is the most common phrase in the Bible. God wants us to shed fear, and Jesus let’s us know that God does this when we trust that we have been given life, and life in abundance.

I want us to watch a short video now about the biggest, largest fear facing educators at this beginning of the school year.

<https://youtu.be/IglhSNNk7Qk>

I have done kindergarten lunch later in the year, and I have done so to avoid being in the lunch room during this apocalypse.

Our children’s educators, staff, and all those teaching have stepped back into the chaos this year, so that children can grow, students can learn, and people can find ways to make the world a better place.

As they begin their year, I chose our scripture today from Jeremiah because it contains the message that I believe the people of our community will need to hear from the church to help make the world a better place for the next 100 years. This scripture come from the book about the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lives in a time when people seem to be turning from God, people are scared because obtuse powers are

starting to rule their very living, and from this a man arises who calls them to turn back to the way of following God.

Before I go further into this scripture though, I want to remind us the rule Jesus gave us for following God. We are to love God, and love others as ourselves. This is what Jeremiah is calling us back to. Now Jeremiah is a prophet and so he tells truth to people that do not want to hear it. He invites them to know where God is speaking and sometimes that means standing up to people older, perceived wiser, and even more powerful than you.

The scripture for today echoes the words of Psalm 139 and it reminds Jeremiah where he came from. A God created him carefully, gave him words, and sent him as a prophet to remind people of God's law.

⁶ “Ah, Lord God,” I said, “I don’t know how to speak
because I’m only a child.”

⁷ The Lord responded,
“Don’t say, ‘I’m only a child.’
Where I send you, you must go;
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⁸ Don’t be afraid of them,
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declares the Lord.

This is what we hope education does for our children. That it removes their fear, and lets them speak truth, so the world might look more like the kingdom of God.

I believe that in the next 100 years the church will only need to creatively teach that God loves us, and that by loving others we can change the world to make the impact we hope for. It is not always easy because true love involves risk, sacrifice and speaking truth to power as it was for Jeremiah and for Jesus.

When I was in college I went to an obscure training for church camps and retreat centers. The Methodists have a camp there called Sumatanga. A beautiful place located in the beautiful mountains of Alabama. There I went to seminars, workshops and info sessions to learn about how to share the gospel in fun ways in nature. Somehow I signed myself up for a class called, “Wacky line dances.”

I almost didn’t go to the class. I almost went for a walk instead, but something urged me to go. When I walked in there was an older woman there, with an old wood portable record player, and she was putting a record on the turntable. I want to remind you we had CDs by this point. I thought to myself, “Is this really something you want to waste your time on?” I almost walked out, and then the woman said, “WELCOME! I am so glad you are here. My name is Nina Reeves.”

As a few more folks gathered she shared she had taught these line dances for years, but they kept asking her to teach them. So, she fired up the record player and on came Buttercup and she taught the dance. Fast forward to this last February, I was with over 800 other delegates from around the world at the United Methodist Special Session of General Conference. Our global denomination was in turmoil, and I already knew that the final nails had been driven into the global church I had known for my entire life. Special interests had not allowed us to create a church open to understandings of human sexuality.

At General Conference you have to use an electronic device to be called on to speak. I had put my name in to speak to this gathering. I was terrified. I got up and I shared a scripture from Paul’s letters that invited us to remember unity over division as a church. I reminded us that our call was to love one another as we loved God. At the moment I was speaking two protestors flanked me and kneeled peacefully on the floor in front of me, angels saying do not be afraid.

I shared my horror that the church that the church was dying. I know the way the connected Methodist Church continues to serve as Christ's educator of change. Then I shared a story of a young Methodist minister who baptized me, one who had been kicked out of pulpits in Alabama for preaching about people of different skin colors needing to be allowed in schools together, and in church together. A man named George Harper, a pastor, who helped the church I grew up in become strong enough to teach another generation of people to teach God's love for young ones to become prophets.

Do you remember what scripture is on the stone out front of our church? Look today what legacy we are trying to fulfill as people come and go from our church. How we are a part of this legacy of Methodists raising up prophets to change the world.

As many of you know the Methodists are still struggling to figure out our next steps in the future, we may divide. However, I have been struck by the Billings Methodists. God is continue to work through us in partnership to clothe people, feed them, and to help us remember we are called to share God's love

Oh, I need to take you back to line dancing with Nina Reeves. The session of line dancing wrapped up and something funny had happened. All of the songs and dances we had done, I knew. I grew up on them at church camps in Montana. As we wrapped up the goofy and not well attended class. Nina and I started talking about how long she had been teaching at the camp. I said, "I think I saw a chapel named after you." She said, "Yes, I hate that they did that." She said, "I told them build the chapel, but naming buildings after people is for when they are dead, and I am not dead, at least not yet."

Then I asked her, I said, "I knew all those dances from the camps I attended growing up." She said, "Where did you grow up?" I told her I grew up in Montana, and said the pastor I baptized was from Alabama did you know him.

“George Harper.....? Why, yes we knew each other well we taught children at this very camp.

Then Nina told me a story. She told me of a time during a camp when her and George gathered a group of kids under one of the big old trees at the camp. During the time in history this story fell Alabama was in the middle of the civil rights movement. The big decision was whether the school should be integrated or not. That black children and white children should not be in the same places together, was commonly thought to be something God wanted in Alabama at that time.

Nina shared with me that George and her asked the children, “What do you think?” The children all answered, “We think it shouldn't matter what color your skin is, we are all God’s children.” Nina shared with me that she and George encouraged the kids to hold on to this truth and that they might need to be part of change that would not be easy. Change can be hard for some people, but God is with us in the change.

Then Nina finished up her story and I said goodbye to her.

I knew something of the story though, George because of his choice to take risks was asked to not preach in pulpits in Alabama. That is how he came to Montana to help the little church I grew up in become a healthy church raising little prophets to go share God’s love. That is why he was in Helena, Montana to baptize me.

When I think of George, when I listen to Jeremiah, when I remember Nina, I think of all those prophets that went before us. Then I am daunted by the prospect that they have gone on, and that we are now the one God is calling to share prophecy in this world.

Who are the prophets that called you to be a prophet? To share God’s truths.

I am sure you had someone, remember them. Now remember this, they invited you to partner with God to help make the world a better place. They taught you to be prophets.

Our baptismal vows in the UMC involve these words. Listen to them and then I am going to give us some work to continue to support the educators and students raising the prophets in our community.

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:
Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?

I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?

I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?

This week I want to leave us all with 2 tasks to help us support those who go to serve to raise up the next generation of prophets.

1. Say a prayer for the teachers in your lives, the ones who have made a difference. Offer their sacrifices in prayer to God, so that you can remember how God's love was active in the foundations they gave you. Remember in your prayers also to pray for the unexpected teachers who have yet to come your way, as well as the ones who have already graced your path.

2. **Help us write letters to educators in our community.** We are going to write letters of support to staff and teachers who work with our children. After church today I will be in the back holding letters the most have names attached, so that we will write to our neighbor school Meadowlark and Big Sky where we are sending supplies. Or if you want take a blank one and write a letter to any educator you know.

I have done this with churches for several years and it has begun to build a connection with that school. One letter was put up on a bulletin board in a teachers room, because it meant a lot to her. We got the opportunity to offer supplies because of these letters, and who knows what else God might do with these letters.

As I said you can take one with a name attached or you can take blank one and go home and go onto the district website or find the name of a teacher you know and send them an email or letter knowing that as people of faith we support what they do in educating our children. That we believe that it is the great equalizer and that we are here to help them as a faith community. Who knows perhaps they will need us to provide them with coats for kids, school supplies, a person to read to students, or any other number of needs that face our schools.

3. **At first service put blessing of backpacks here**

How are you called to be a prophet today....go into this world called by the prophets of your life to speak the word of God's love into the lives of others today.