

Jeremiah 1, 4-10 „There’s no excuse when God is calling“

Dear sisters and brothers at Peace Church,

for my sermon today I would like you to picture yourself in your favourite reading place in your preferred reading position with your Bible in your hands. Have you arrived there in your imagination? Then please think about how you read the Bible... do you search for the stories and texts that you have always loved and that give you comfort at all times? Do you do special readings that are recommended by a devotional book? Or do you just open it up and let that very page speak to you? If your way of reading the Bible resembles mine in the least, you might have discovered that there are parts of the Bible that bring childhood memories, give you a feeling of joy and feel like an old friend who you need to visit off and on in order to feel at home in this world. Those are the passages that you will always find and cherish. But then there are these parts that don’t seem to speak to you at first glance, that you might find hard to understand or which give you a feeling of unrest.

To be honest, the books of the prophets were a part of the Bible which I often chose to neglect when reading it. I can’t really tell you why. Maybe there were too many different kings and battles involved; maybe I just didn’t find their stories and messages uplifting enough- whatever the reasons might have been, I chose to ignore them most of my life.

But God had another plan in store for me. I don’t want to insist that he had me in mind, when he had the writers of our faith and worship material make „the prophets“ one of the major chapters for us to read. And I can’t imagine him whispering to Christine that she should have us write an essay about a prophet just to draw **my** attention to that part of the Bible. But I can surely say that ever since I’ve heard this voice in my head saying „No getting away this time. No excuses, Caro! There is a prophet world waiting for you to explore.“ And so I did. This sermon is the outcome of a healing journey in which I came to understand the meaning of the prophets in their time and in which I got acquainted with Jeremiah. I would like to share the outcome of that journey with you today.

There are actually 16 prophetic books in the Bible. Scholars have made a division into major and minor prophets, based on the lengths of their books rather than on their importance. I found it uplifting to see what a variety of people God chose as his prophets. They contained men and women from all different social classes. What they all had in common though was their call from God to be messengers in the world they lived in. I always thought of prophets to be foretellers who merely predicted events that would occur in the future. But we should also regard them as forthtellers who called the people to repentance and obedience in God’s world. It was they who spoke out against what was happening in the world around them. They lifted their voices against injustice, oppression of the poor, corruption and growing immorality. They admonished people to stop sinning to avoid God’s punishment, but they also spread messages of hope by talking about God’s undying love for his people and his forgiving spirit. Jeremiah was one of the major prophets.

Jeremiah, whose name in Hebrew means „The Lord is exalted“ was born about 645 years before Christ in the village of Anathoth which lies a few miles north of Jerusalem. He was a priest, yet it was not on his initiative that he began working as a prophet. Jeremiah was only 18 years old when he received his call to be a prophet. That wasn't exactly the easiest job to be called to at that early age, especially since the time in which he lived was dark and cruel. It was a very young, godless King who ruled the country and there was lots of injustice to cry out against.

Let us take a closer looker at Jeremiah's call to find out more about how he was chosen.

Now 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.»

Jeremiah's call begins with these few sentences from God. The loving and encouraging words from God contain everything that Jeremiah needs for his job. God has known him longer than his parents and his family. Nobody knows him better. It was God's choice to bring him to the world and there was a plan waiting for him before he even saw one glimpse of it. Jeremiah doesn't have to live up to God's expectations... he doesn't have to be the best, the most eloquent, the strongest, biggest or brightest. There is no interview for the job. Jeremiah hasn't even had a chance to think about nominating himself for it. The job was there waiting for him from the day he was born. Just like that. Isn't that uplifting? And God has obviously given him all the gifts that he needed to pursue that job. „ **I have formed you, consecrated you, appointed you...**“ he says.

When God calls you to do something he doesn't do it because you've earned it or because you're most routined. You don't need to show a perfect application portfolio with an ever so beautiful photo to go with it. God often calls us to do things we never believe we could do. It's so much different from the business world around us which is dominated by competition and performance. In God's kingdom, God sneaks up to everybody one fine day and calls him or her to make a difference in this world, no matter how weak or unfit this person might feel him- or herself and no matter how small the difference is that he or she makes.

„I have formed you. I have consecrated you. I have appointed you...“, he says.

Can you hear him?

What is he calling you to do?

What has he appointed you for?

Perhaps God is calling you to serve the church in some special way.

Perhaps he is calling you to make a difference for your children. To speak out whenever injustice rules the schools, whenever boys and girls come to a limit, not because of their intellect but because of their lack of language or their living conditions. Whenever violence wins over peaceful game.

Perhaps God is calling you to be a wonderful friend. One who listens. One who takes time, shares a cup of tea, babysits in times of crisis and simply cares whenever others turn their backs to get back to their own lives.

Maybe God is calling you to fight for peace in the world... to write petitions, go on demonstrations, light candles in times of darkness and despair... and keep on fighting, even if it seems so useless at times.

Maybe God is calling you to be the best in your job... not according to worldly standards but rather in a way pleasing to God. Being good by being different and facing the consequences that that brings.

God is calling you, too... Are you listening?

I am sure Jeremiah was listening very carefully to what God had to say but he was afraid to commit to the job expected from him and tried to get out of it by saying:

„Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.“

If Jeremiah just had a glimpse of an idea of what God was really calling him to do, we can entirely understand his hesitation and his excuses. For Jeremiah was being called to one of the toughest jobs of all the Hebrew prophets. He was facing the future of preaching unpopular messages to people who really didn't want to hear what he had to say. He would have to warn the king not to revolt against Babylon and would have to watch the revolt break out anyway. He would be charged with desertion to the enemy, put in jail and thrown into a cistern where he would almost die. Jeremiah would not have an easy life as a prophet... no wonder he was making excuses.

But when there's a job to be done, God takes no excuses. God's response to Jeremiah makes that clear: ***„Don't 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.“***

A harsh command and a big promise, I would say. God expects much from us but he surely offers a lot in return. He not only promises to be with Jeremiah but he also touches his mouth and says: ***„Now I have put my words in your mouth.“***

Wow! And what beautiful words he gave to him.

„I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people“ is a promise that Jeremiah speaks to God's people in chapter 31.

And in chapter 33 God lays the words ***„Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known“*** into Jeremiah's mouth.

God accepted no excuses and made Jeremiah one of the great prophets despite all the reservations and excuses Jeremiah had. God needed Jeremiah and Jeremiah was the only one who was fit to do the job. In the eyes of God that is...

Let us go back to the tasks God calls us to do. Are we excuse-makers just like Jeremiah was? What is the nature of our excuses?

Are we unable to react to God's call because we are too young? Too old? Too weak or too self-conscious? Too rich? Too poor? Too occupied with our own problems?

Do we think we have too little time because of a stressful family life? Are we unaware of our gifts and talents because a nasty teacher or an evil-tempered boss once took all our self-dignity?

Do we simply think we are not worth receiving a call from God?

The Bible is full of excuse-makers and God shows us how he wraps them in words of comfort and gestures of assurance. God promises to give the right words to say and offers his guidance throughout the journey. Whoever is called by God needs no excuses. You only need the faith and the courage to rely on this guiding hand and his breath on your words, your actions and the outcome of your challenge.

„Breathe on me, breath of God!“, Jeremiah must have thought many times while he was „plucking up and pulling down“, „destroying and overthrowing“, „building and planting“ as God had commanded him to do.

These tasks that God had chosen for Jeremiah already show that it wasn't an easy path that he was laying out for him. It was a life-long battle to bring God's message to the people. Jeremiah's message is, above all, one of renewal, rebuilding and restoration. But this renewal must be preceded by a radical removal of what already existed.

The mission to „uproot and tear down“ has an important place in Jeremiah's ministry. He speaks out against the deep and irreversible corruption of God's people that is expressed in sin. He points out that sin is an incurable disease that takes root in the human heart and thus makes people incapable of any relationship with God. In order to restore that relationship, people have to tear down old patterns, lifestyles and priorities. They have to destroy the thoughts and deeds that hinder them from facing the new order and the new covenant that God is about to establish with his people through Jeremiah.

God also places words of hope in Jeremiah's mouth which Jeremiah brings to the nation. He shares God's offer to replant the nation, to build up the people and plant hope and light into their hearts.

Strangely enough, the people don't want to hear about it all... not about the destruction and not about the days of restoration. And Jeremiah has to face the experience that being a prophet doesn't bring you fame and adoration but rather drives you to the end of the limits of your strength and leaves you with many more enemies than friends.

No doubt, the job God has called him to do is a challenge. It is a costly and painful journey, requiring a lot of courage and stamina each and every day despite the presence of God. Which one of us would want to swap with him?

Not I for sure. But his example, his life and especially his call show me that God does expect us to take the long way sometimes...to do the tasks that we try avoid... to overcome our fears and stand strong to make the difference. And I have also understood that we can do it, because he has taught us to...he has encouraged us to... he has appointed us to- through Jeremiah and all the other prophets and leaders he has called.

I wouldn't have chose to preach on Jeremiah on my own...actually I wouldn't be preaching at all, if I had only followed my own fears and feelings of inadequacy... but here I am.

You might not choose to fight against a racist teacher in a foreign language but a crowd of children need you to do so. And you can.

You might not be in the mood to stand out in the cold when a handful of people silently protest against the killing in wars all over the world but you might make the difference that day.

You might not feel like the perfect babysitter and would rather listen to a sermon in peace and quiet, yet you might be the person called to help out in the creche and give the other women some relief on a Sunday morning.

God made a choice of appointing Jeremiah to be a prophet. Jeremiah made a choice of accepting. I have made a choice to preach about it.

And what is your choice of the day?

Who are you in the eyes of God and who are you meant to be? Where is God touching you this very moment and where is your path leading you?

You might take a detour in the Bible at your favourite reading place yourself tonight... and experience for yourself that God has much more faith in you than you could ever have. Don't hesitate to follow his directions. Just accept with a smile on your face and your feet steadily on the ground. And why?

„ I have formed you, I have consecrated you, I have appointed you...“, God says. Not only to Jeremiah but also to you.

Amen.