

Sermon on Jeremiah 1: 4-10 I know you...

I know you...

sisters & brothers – when have you heard such a sentence last?

I know you... I need you... I've called you...

I know you – you can do it!?

I know you can...

How you actually interpret this sentence depends on the context and tone. It can be true encouragement, but it can also be quite the opposite.

If, "I know you", sounds like... "I know you, you'll never change, you'll always be the same, you'll never get this right, I know you!"

If it sounds like this, all the encouragement is gone leaving space for plain judgement - just or unjust – how do we know?

I know you –

is a sentence we can hear with very many different feelings.

"I know you" spoken to a student just facing final exams, spoken by a father or a professor who really believes in him, who knows how hard he's worked toward this, can sound like "Stand up, head held high, be proud of yourself . You can do it!"

You will make it in the end – sounds like a promise.

I know you –

whispered by the tired voice of a young mother who's at the end of her rope, can sound like "this is never going to change, I am sitting here in this terrible trap, and this is not at all how I imagined it to be..."

I know you – when the husband comes home too late. He hasn't given her any warning. Here he is holding these flowers in his hand, promising to try harder from now on.

I know you – she may think. It 'll be all the same all over again.

Tomorrow he'll make a big effort and be back home in time to play with the children and have dinner with them. He will take the rubbish down and offer to read the bedtime story. And the day after tomorrow, he will again forget to tell her that he'll be late. At the weekend he'll have this important business meeting out of town that can't possibly be postponed – and she feels more lonely and cut off than ever.

I know you...

I know you –

spoken to a best friend who's just learned that the illness of her only child is not curable. I have known you for so many years now. You seem to be born to fight and cope. You will manage! You will live with this child. You will make her happy, you will accept her limits and grow with them. You will eventually enjoy just who she is. I know you.

She will love you. She will be well cared and looked after. You will cope. I know you!

You've changed the world before. You will do it again. You will make it. You must do it – for your sake, for her sake, - for God's sake.

What you do, if you have the courage to do it, what you can do with this child of yours, will make all the difference to others. I know you!

Sisters and brothers –
three different stories – the same three words.
I know you.

Encouraging, or judging, or supporting... all depends on the context.

I know you – are the words God speaks to Jeremiah in our OT reading.

They are sort of poured over him as a big surprise – frightening even – but also like a true declaration of love. I know you.

That's how the book about the great prophet starts – at least after we've been given some bare-bone background information...

1 The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin,

2 to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

3 It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

What on earth do we know about a village called Anathoth? About King Josiah and the 13th year of his reign?

About Jerusalem and the captivity we have our assumptions – these ring a bell?! But back to Jeremiah. He didn't seem prepared for all this in his village of Anathoth. It comes over him like a rainstorm, and he doesn't really see a way out.

There isn't much information that would allow us to picture Jeremiah. With this biblical text we are somehow placed in the year 626 before Christ... names of kings, sure – but they don't sufficiently describe ups and downs, life and faith, threats and suffering of the people in this time.

And maybe this is not what the author wants at this point.

Reports on history will follow. But here in chapter 1 it is all about young Jeremiah and God talking to him. I know you.

And it is not only God talking to a person, it is God talking himself – God himself – into somebody's life.

Jeremiah hears it, is touched by it, tries to escape from it, and is surely reminded of so many situations in his life.

I know you.

I know who you are. I know where you come from, and where your paths will lead you. I know the places of your past and your future. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you."

I know your successes and your failures. I know your dark and your bright sides. I know your guilt and your courage, your dreams and your tears... and I need you.

Before you were born, I consecrated you, I appointed you. I have a job for you, a mission, a purpose in life.

Isn't that poetry to our ears?

Promising plain beautiful poetry?

I know you and I need you – spoken by nobody less than God?!

And what does Jeremiah answer?

6 Then I said, «Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.»

I am only...

He tries to get away without fulfilling the task God has already given to him.

...I appointed you a prophet to the nations.»

...a prophet to the nations, this was just too much for Jeremiah, and he says: No, thank you!

But God wouldn't be God, if he didn't immediately respond.

Do not say, I am only a boy...

Don't do this.

Don't say this.

You will do it... you'll go and speak –
and I will be with you.

We have heard God saying this to other great leaders. Remember Moses and the burning bush? Joshua at the river and so many others...

You'll do it!

In Jeremiah's case God goes even further. It is not only that God is with Jeremiah. God promises to provide what Jeremiah will need.

«Now I have put my words in your mouth.

...and he even touches him. The encounter is more than just an intellectual one. God touches... physically... raises up and strengthens – just as Jesus did in so many of his stories of healing.

It is God's touch and tenderness that eventually help Jeremiah to see beyond the burden to God's promise!

We don't hear Jeremiah express his change of mind! But obviously he lets God continue to speak and describe the mission he has chosen Jeremiah for.

9 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.

**10 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.»**

There is so much to do – and nothing nice and easy ...

pluck up and pull down

destroy and overthrow

build and plant...

I know you, God says. You can do it!

And Jeremiah who just a few moments ago tried to talk himself out of the commitment, must somehow feel these confirming sentences of his God which embrace and cover him like a coat of promise. God will be with him. God will show him the way. God will give him words to speak – whatever happens. If you know Jeremiah's story, you know that he's got to go through a lot.

More than any other prophet Jeremiah suffered as the mouth of God. He had to speak out God's truth; he suffered the people's disgust and disbelief. He must have wanted to tear his heart out of his body, when the terrible things he had predicted, came true. In the end Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple torn down, and Jeremiah taken a prisoner of war in his own country.

Good that he didn't know all that right from the beginning. Good that we don't always know everything right from the beginning...
"Do not be afraid, for I am with you..."

No matter what harsh things came in Jeremiah's life, he continued to be the prophet of God. Even in captivity he kept on preaching and proclaiming, encouraging others and holding fast to God's good plans for the future of his people.

God had known him, before he even formed him in the womb. And God had done well by appointing this young man who pretended to not be able to speak...

We may find it difficult to imagine the depths of Jeremiah's story with his God. But maybe some of what Jeremiah lived through is not at all far away from what we and others experience or have experienced?

What does it mean to us to be called by God, consecrated and appointed?

God's words to Jeremiah are words for us, too. Including the: do not be afraid... because I have made you and I know you.

We may never hear God's voice as clearly as Jeremiah did. But especially when we look back at our life stories, I am sure we can identify many threads that were held together by God without us noticing it...

...when you go through hell – in terms of a relationship, your marriage, your family life – at the end of it all you can see that it has not only wounded and marked you, but it has also made you a survivor. You have grown strong. You learn from the experience who you are!

The same is true for illnesses, accidents, misfortunes...

God's promise to be with us, to provide what we need in life, because he has made us, called us, and appointed us, doesn't necessarily mean that we will only live on the sunny side of life!

Babylon – where Jeremiah was sending words of encouragement to, to support those Israelites in captivity there – had rose gardens, but not for Jeremiah's people. Jeremiah's rose gardens were in his heart and mind, in the thoughts he shared, in the faith he held fast, and in the beautiful poetry of his famous letters with which he encouraged generations of Israelites to live and carry on!

If it is true that God knows us... that he's made us in the womb (and this is not a scientific but a philosophical statement. The question is not so much, where I come from – physically – but where I belong – emotionally)...

...if it is true that God knows us and needs us, then it is also true, as it was for Jeremiah, that we can stick to God's appointment for us and fulfil our calling.

As Jeremiah had poetry, beauty, comfort and hope in his heart, we can have it, too.

And as Jeremiah could share all this with others – even in the most difficult and dangerous situations – we can share it, too.

Let's return to our stories from the beginning:

however uncertain and nervous, however disappointed and sad, however desperate and weak we feel, the "I know you", God speaks to us, wants to lift us up and make us strong – just as Jesus lifted up the crippled woman and made her free.

But this is another sermon ...

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I know you; I need you"

Take this as God's personal approach to you today. Hold fast to it and discover who you are in God's eyes... and who you are meant to be. Amen.

Prayer

Call us, God,

as you called Jeremiah.

Know us, God,

better than we know ourselves.

Consecrate us, appoint us and use us.

And if we try to get away without fulfilling the task you give us, forgive us & encourage us.

Put out your hand and touch us,
so that we may touch others.

Fill us with courage and wisdom
to say and do

what you want us to do.

Amen.