

**Sermon by the Rev. Bollin Millner  
Grace and Holy Trinity Church  
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***Jeremiah 1:4-10***

*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." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not 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, says the LORD."*

*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. 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."*

***Luke 13:10-17***

*Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered*

*him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.*

It is great to be back and I thank the lay leaders, staff and all the members of the church for their ministry while I was away. I read the newsletter while on vacation and I thought, "I'd like to be a member of that church!" So much going on that is of the gospel, that is important...mission trips, youth work, outreach, education, worship and so on.

While away I spent some time in the mountains and hiked for a few days on the Appalachian Trail with my good friend, Stuart Schadt. We had some challenges, including one day with 2200 feet of climb. I have gotten my pack down to 22 lbs, which is great...but 22 pounds is 22 pounds when going steeply up hill for hours. (Which of course, brings me back to the metaphor I've shared with you before...think about all the burdens we carry around in this life and how hard that is...we are better off to let go.)

We ran out of water at one point, and I was desperate to get to this spring marked on the map. It seemed to take forever to get there...but eventually...we found it...this beautiful, small pool, endlessly replenishing...water has never tasted better...cold, spring water. I gained a whole new appreciation for the Israelites in the desert...and of Jesus as the well of life!

We did encounter wildlife. No bears this year as on our last hike. But deer, a skunk (almost got me!),...they really are beautiful animals. And one morning...a startling encounter.

There were lots of cicadas about...you know that scraping noise they make...I heard that sound...but the timbre was a bit off...then I realized it wasn't coming from the trees but from the ground...and very quickly (and in time) realized that there was a huge rattle snake just by the side of the trail. The snake was poised to strike and holding its ground. But the purpose of the rattle was to warn us...back off, you are going the wrong direction...the rattle, can I just say I am extremely grateful for it...warned us to avoid danger. Which we did.

So, naturally enough, upon my return, and upon reading our first lesson from Jeremiah...I made the connection. Prophetic warnings are like the rattles of a rattle snake. Prophets say, "You are in danger. Turn away. Seek life, not death."

Jeremiah's story is a compelling one. Called as a young person, he did not feel up to the task. But while some may scorn youth, the Lord God does not. "Do not say, I am only a boy...you shall go where I send you and say what I tell you."

The passage for today describes Jeremiah's call. And it gives a quantitative analysis of the message.... which is two thirds negative and one third positive.

Pluck up and pull down,  
destroy and over throw,  
build and to plant.

A bit beyond our passage for today at verse 16, the substance of Jeremiah's judgment is given: Jeremiah, speaking for the Lord says. "I will speak to them with judgments concerning all their

vices, because they forsook Me, burned incense to foreign gods and worshiped the works of their hands." As one commentator interprets these are the three sins, not only of the ancients but of humankind: "Forsaking God, false worship and preoccupation with themselves." Orthodox Study Bible, page 1112)

Jeremiah paid a high personal price to carry that word forward, and indeed he is the "sole prophet who revealed to us the inner struggle that such a mission caused him." He was persecuted and hated... This hatred even comes across into the English language. The word, "jeremiad" derives from Jeremiah, means a prolonged complaint or an angry harangue. In his own day people mocked Jeremiah, calling him "Terror on every side" because of the negative quality of the message. And they moved beyond words to persecution... "The entire book is crisscrossed with...dark events." (Jerome Biblical Commentary, page 271)

Jeremiah issues the warning, just like the rattle snake warned me. And warnings, even though Jeremiah takes a lot of abuse for it, are good things.

Now there is a difference between snakes and prophets. The snake will warn and will also deliver the punishment, by biting you. Jeremiah warns...but it is God who punishes.

I am suspicious of those who inflict harm on others in the name of God's judgment. There was a recent Time magazine story about the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban, in the name of God, is mutilating women who in any way or form, stand up for themselves. The fear that people have of women and the violence that many inflict on women is appalling. It is even more appalling when done in the name of God.

I know that opinion about the mission in Afghanistan is varied. Everyone supports our troops wholeheartedly, and we have members who are serving in Afghanistan and we love them and pray for them. Questions about the strategy are not questions about the men and women serving. But regardless of your opinion about the overall strategy, if the plight of women in that part of the world can be bettered, that will be a good thing.

Jeremiah is not like the Taliban. He pronounces judgment, but he does it in a genuine effort to get people to change their ways and to gain a better life. Jeremiah is the victim of persecution, not the perpetrator of it. He may be the rattle of warning...but God delivers the bite. The arc of God's will may be long...but it does bend toward justice. That is what Jeremiah is talking about, how God in history brings redemption but also judgment.

No one likes to hear words of judgment. But we need to hear them. We need to embrace hard words. First there is the truth that there is a problem. Then, change can come. As the Gospel for today notes with stark honesty...there was a woman with a crippling spirit. We are all, in various ways, bent over by crippling spirits. That can take many forms, but let's talk about personal preoccupations.

Where faith is concerned do we obsess about little things...letting the true good we could actually do left undone. Jesus said, "Woe to you...hypocrites. For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters...Justice and mercy and faith." (Mt 23:23)

Or how about this: Are you obsessed with how worthless you are (and thus self-centered) or are you obsessed with

how great you are and with getting yours (and thus self-centered).

Do you try to fix everything (and of course fail) or do you just let yourself off the hook by saying "what can one person do?" (and thus fail).

What are the hard prophetic words you must hear in order to grow into the full stature of Christ? Words of judgment point the way to life. Accept the truth and hear the words of our Lord. He stands in front of each one of us. Lay your burdens down. "You are set free." Amen.