

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
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Word and Mouth

The Word of the Lord from Jeremiah 1[:9]: "And the LORD said to me, 'Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Jeremiah

"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.'"

Those were pretty good credentials for the prophet Jeremiah. Elsewhere in the book, the Lord would complain about many prophets who went out to preach without being called and without being sent, and they were bringing death upon the land because they were prophesying falsely in God's name (Jeremiah 27:14-15). As Jeremiah began his prophetic task, there was no doubt in his mind: the Lord had called him and the Lord was sending him. The Lord said He was putting His words in Jeremiah's mouth. (Furthermore, especially since we are so close to the anniversary of the infamous Roe v. Wade court decision legalizing abortion in our country, it's worth noting that God did more than call and send Jeremiah. He formed him in the womb. He knew him and consecrated him in the womb, and even then appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations. That's an eloquent statement of a baby's humanity from conception on, that God holds the life of the unborn to be precious indeed.)

But back to Jeremiah's prophetic call. God was doing the calling. God was doing the sending. God was putting the words in his mouth to speak. In fact, He promised Jeremiah that the prophet was set "over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." That's a lot of credential and support from Almighty God. What could possibly keep Jeremiah from going out to do what God directly called him to do?

How about age? That's what Jeremiah came up with: "Then I said, 'Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.'" He *was* young, after all: we don't know his age for sure, but commentators speculate that he was probably less than twenty years old. In a nation where the rulers and priests had rejected the Lord, where public sentiment was largely in support of idols and seriously against the one true God, who was going to listen to some fresh-faced kid who suddenly appeared on scene and said, "I've got a message from God"? That's the best construction on Jeremiah—that he wanted to go and he sincerely didn't want to be a bad choice. It's entirely possible, however, that his motives were less noble: he might very well have been thinking, "There's no way I want to do this, so I've got to give God a good reason why I'm not the guy." In a society that honored age and experience, an obvious excuse would be his youth.

He's not the only preacher ever to come up with a pretext to avoid speaking God's Word. In Exodus 3 and 4, Moses told God that someone else should lead the people out of Egypt, calling himself a nobody who couldn't talk well anyway. When the Lord called Gideon to rescue Israel from the Midianites in Judges 6, Gideon tried to bow out because he was the least of his father's house, which wasn't a very big house anyway. In the New Testament, Paul had to exhort young pastor Timothy, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). The Bible is full of reluctant preachers: when Isaiah cried out to the Lord, "Here am I—send me! Send me!," he was the exception, not the rule. Perhaps we need to tip our hats to Jonah for his honesty: when the Lord told him to go to Nineveh and preach His Word, Jonah didn't spend a lot of time coming up with excuses to cover himself. He just ran the other way. (There is, here, a tangential lesson

for the Church and for congregations. Beware the eager, exciting preacher who tries to foist himself upon God's people. Zeal is no proof of faithfulness. St. Paul was a very zealous preacher in his early years—when he was imprisoning and killing Christians for their faith.)

But back to Jeremiah. He had his reason ready: "I'm too young, O Lord. You've got the wrong guy." But the Lord didn't accept it. Jeremiah relates, "But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a youth"; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD.' Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.'"

Jeremiah's excuse didn't wash for two reasons. One is that, by his excuse, he accused God of being wrong. The Lord said, "You're the man," and Jeremiah said, "You're mistaken." But God always speaks the truth: and were He to err once, all of His Word would be cast into doubt. That's quite an accusation against God. I'm quite sure that Jeremiah didn't intend it that way. Nevertheless, that's the way it was.

The other reason is this: God's Word doesn't depend on the speaker. God's Word has its authority and power from God, not from the mouth it's coming out of. The ultimate example might well be Numbers 22, where the Lord opened the mouth of Balaam's donkey to speak. The words didn't carry authority because the animal said them, but because they were God's words. It didn't matter if Jeremiah was 18 years old or 3 years old or 80 years old. If he spoke God's Word, it was God's Word which would pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant.

If nothing else, the Lord wouldn't let Jeremiah's excuse stand for the sake of Jeremiah's own faith. If Jeremiah believed his own excuse, he would never believe that God's Word had the authority that God said it did. He would never be sure that God's promises of deliverance were true. But Jeremiah could be confident that God's Word was God's Word, and that the Lord would do what He said.

Was his life as a prophet as bad as he feared? Actually, it might have been worse than he imagined. Jeremiah was not treated well by his fellows for telling them God's truth. He was shunned, mistreated and abused. This did not impeach the words he spoke, nor did it prove that Jeremiah was a false or faithless prophet. Jeremiah's life and rejection foreshadowed the treatment that Jesus would receive, for it is precisely because Jesus told the truth that He was rejected and crucified.

So Jeremiah's life on earth was not a happy one. Neither was the life of anyone else in Jerusalem as the Babylonians crashed through the walls. But now he is delivered from his trials, and he rests from his labors in the presence of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen again.

II. The Big Temptation

God's Word is God's Word, with all power and authority. You have further testimony of this from today's Gospel lesson: Jesus speaks, and the people marvel that He speaks with authority. He speaks—and He heals people by speaking. He speaks and His Word sends demons scurrying away. But when people want Him to do miracles the next day, He declares that His purpose is not to work miracles but to preach that powerful Word. Later on, risen from the dead, He says to His disciples in John 20[:22-23], "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." So when the disciples spoke of forgiveness in Christ Jesus to people, they weren't just telling them about forgiveness: they were giving it to them because they were speaking God's powerful Word.

We recognize that God's Word remains God's powerful Word; and to explain that passage from John 20, the *Small Catechism* teaches, "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us *by His divine command*, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian

congregation, and, again, when the absolve the sins of those who repent and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself."

It's not the pastor. It's the Word. The pastor is simply the one called to speak publicly God's Word. It doesn't matter if he's young or old. It doesn't even matter if he believes, because it's the Word of God no matter who utters it. What a great gift to the Church! What a great gift to you! When you speak the Word, read it, sing it, meditate upon it, it is God's powerful and authoritative Word at work.

How powerful? Don't forget St. Paul, Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." By His Word, Jesus saves you. By His Word, He shares with you His victory over sin, death and Satan.

You can therefore be sure that the last thing the devil would ever want you to do is hear or speak God's Word. And if he can't deprive you of it completely, then his next gambit is to make you doubt that it's worth doing—either because of you or because of the Word itself.

Daily devotions are a tough discipline. Many do not try to study and meditate upon God's Word on a daily basis at all; and those who do will find that it's a difficult practice to maintain. Why? There are a multitude of explanations, but it usually comes down to this: there are so many other pressing and important and sometimes enjoyable things to do. (Boy, howdy: yes, there are a whole lot of things to do.) But how are you going to defend something as more important than hearing the Lord on a daily basis? There's certainly an application here along the lines of "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." But in keeping with our text, I would urge you to consider this: I suggest that the reason that people find other matters more pressing or important is not just misplaced priorities, but because they doubt that hearing God's Word daily would make a difference. In other words, they doubt that God's Word is God's Word, with all its power and authority. They've bought the devil's lie that the Word is just words, just like all the other words floating around the world.

The same could be said for sporadic church attendance, when the reasoning is that there are so many other things to do than hear the Lord's Word. But that's rather silly law to preach to the sorts who turn out for church on a Wednesday night, so I'll move right along.

But I will mention prayer, since I hold to the idea that prayer is largely speaking God's Word—His promises—back to Him. Why would we not pray to the Lord? Because we don't believe it would make a difference—or because we don't know His Word well enough to know what to pray. Either way, it's a nod to the lie once again that God's Word isn't anything special at all.

You'll have the chance to speak God's Word to others, and there will be times after a conversation where you find yourself saying, "I could have talked about Jesus and His forgiveness and mercy, but I didn't. Why not?" Often, the answer is, "Because that's just not me." I'll buy that, but only to a certain extent. Jeremiah said, "That's just not me," too. But the Lord's Word was still the Lord's Word. When you speak it, it remains God's Word. And where you find yourself looking back and saying, "I shared the Gospel, but it could have gone a whole lot better," it's still God's Word—and you're still way above Balaam's donkey when it comes to eloquence on any given day.

The devil wants to silence you most when adversity it at its greatest. It is when the situation seems most hopeless and death is very near that the Word will seem weaker than ever. This just shows the evil one's cunning, and how easily we fall prey to his temptations. See, God has given His Word *most of all* to bring hope in Christ to the hopeless, to proclaim eternal life in Christ to those who are dying. That Word still plucks up and breaks down. It still destroys and overthrows. It still builds and plants. And it still forgives sins and raises the dead.

So where you are misled to believe that the Word depends upon the speaker—yourself included, repent; and rejoice that it is God's Word. Where you are tempted to believe that the Word cannot do any good, repent again: for that is the devil's lie and the Lord's Word will not return to Him void.

The Lord still speaks. By it, He preserves creation. By it, He thwarts the evil foe and preserves you. By it, He has transformed a splash of water into a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration of the Holy Ghost at your Baptism, and He has likewise turned a small meal of bread and wine into a Supper where He gives you Himself, forgiveness, faith and life everlasting.

God Word remains God's powerful Word. By it, He declares with all power and authority that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen