

## **“Out of the Mouths of Babes”**

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be open  
to hearing your good news from wherever it is shared. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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It's not every Hebrew prophet who gets an entire word coined using his name. The American Heritage Dictionary tells me that a “jeremiad” is defined as a “righteous prophecy of doom.” The words “diatribe” or “tirade” also come to mind. Unlike Isaiah who often breaks into beautiful poetry, Jeremiah is mostly just seen as cranky and judgmental. You might be tempted to picture him in your head as a crotchety old man. So what are we to do with this introduction in which Jeremiah resists God's call, protesting that he is “only a boy”? What does some punk kid have to be so angry about?

Jeremiah, of course, would like to point out that it's not him that's angry. Those are God's words coming from his mouth, he says; God who appointed him to pluck up and pull down. But when we think about the prophet going about following his calling, it is important to picture him as he is described, rather than as our caricatures might lead us to imagine him. It hits differently to hear such screeds coming from a young person rather than a grizzled old grump. And perhaps more importantly, it can help us listen for the words of God more effectively in our own time, if we expand our understanding of where they might arise.

Why is it that we have a tendency to dismiss the words of young people? “Young,” of course, being defined as younger than us, no matter how old we are. Was Jeremiah more dramatic than he might have been in order to counteract the likelihood that people wouldn’t take him seriously? Were there hormones affecting the situation? I have always been a person who wished I loved opera. I don’t not like opera. But I was able to enjoy it more, once it occurred to me to think of all the characters in an opera as teenagers, so that their melodramatic behavior would make more sense. All those big feelings, all that sense that every moment is life or death. Talk about “prophecies of doom”!

Was Jeremiah a teenager? He claimed “I am only a boy,” but God comes back with “Don’t give me that ‘I’m only a boy’ business; I know exactly how old you are. I’ve been preparing you for this since before you were born!” Note that God isn’t saying the assignment isn’t difficult. The goal is not to go comfort people and bring them hope. You can see how there might be some reluctance when the marching orders include words like “destroy” and “overthrow.” If he hasn’t yet reached a point in his life when people pay any attention to what he says, you can understand why he might not feel qualified.

There is a similar dynamic operating in this scene from Luke where Jesus shows up in his hometown and starts connecting with scripture at the synagogue. At first, the folks there are more than happy to claim him. “So articulate!” “What a smart cookie!” There is a possessive, paternalistic vibe to it all. “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

“Our own native son making good.” It’s like they’re hoping for the hometown discount on passes into heaven or something. But Jesus is having none of that. His tone shifts immediately, and though we assume he’s around 30 years old, his next move has a certain teenage flair about it. It’s like he’s being intentionally provocative, not telling them anything they don’t know, but reminding them of the stories they’ve already heard that dramatically counteract the favored status they seemed to be seeking.

Do you remember these stories? There’s a famine, a drought, the heavens were shut up and there was no rain. Elijah was wandering about and came to the house of a widow with one son. He asks to stay with them, but the woman protests that they just have this tiny bit of meal and oil left, so they were about to make their final meal before lying down to die. But Elijah presses her so she relents, and then the meal and the oil miraculously don’t run out for months, as she uses them to feed the three of them. Jesus brings this story up because the widow wasn’t one of the people of Israel, though there were plenty of widows who were that Elijah could have taken up residence with and thus shared miracles with instead. Naaman was a Syrian military commander who suffered from leprosy. He came to Elisha and was healed, unlike, as Jesus rudely points out, numerous Israelite lepers.

His point is clear. And it is not appreciated. The mood of the crowd shifts dramatically, and next thing you know, they’re trying to push Jesus off a cliff. We don’t like being reminded that we’re not as special as we’d like to think we are, do we?

Especially not when we were just having a nice moment, reminiscing about this child we watched grow up, reveling in how our dreams about where he might end up are about to come true. Young people have a terrible habit of saying things out loud that we'd just as soon weren't said.

It is no coincidence that the first person to cry out that the Emperor had no clothes was a little girl. It is no coincidence that young people are leaving their churches in droves, having been taught from birth that "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world," but then watching as those same church folks erected barriers to keep out all sorts of different kinds of people. You want to root out hypocrisy; call a teenager. You want someone to speak the uncomfortable truths out loud, ask a young person. You want someone to enumerate your mistakes and failings as a congregation, put the youth group on the job.

But we don't really want any of that, do we? Nobody likes being called a hypocrite, especially when we know it's true. So instead, we dismiss it all as youthful passion, juvenile foolishness, hormones, and then lament later that the young people don't seem to come around anymore. It's not like we pushed them off a cliff! At least, not directly...

What do you think we might hear if we listened more carefully to the voices of the young and other marginalized in our midst? Could it be that by tuning out those voices, we are failing to hear God? When we complain about the cheek of those know-it-all youngsters, acting like they have a superior understanding of how we

should relate to one another, are we, in fact, in danger of dismissing the call of the gospel that the Holy Spirit is trying to deliver to us? What happened to our own youthful passion? Do you miss it? Are you glad you got over it? What did you lose when you let it go?

I worry that the older we get, the more likely we are to draw our circles more tightly. So we need young people around us who will continually push us to broaden our horizons. The people of Nazareth were offended because Jesus wanted them to understand they not only weren't getting special privileges by virtue of being his childhood neighbors, but more importantly, they didn't need those special privileges. That's not how God's love works. It's not an exclusive benefit that is more precious when fewer people have access. In fact, the love of God becomes more powerful the more widely it is shared. When our young people call our bluff and demand that we live up to the lessons we taught them about God's love being for everyone, we need to thank them for their courage in reminding us.

Is this what Jesus meant when he said we need to enter into the kingdom of God like a child? Is this what it means when the prophet promised that "a little child shall lead"? How could our world be changed if we started listening to young people? If we started believing that God has been preparing all of us from before our births to live lives of expansive welcome and robust righteousness? What would happen if we all followed Jesus with the passion of a teenager? Let's find out! Hallelujah and Amen!