

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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(Introduction and background; Jeremiah 1)

Study #1

Sermon series: Faithful

(Stories from Jeremiah)

Introduction: Domestication...

A few years ago, it was my habit to go on week-long backpacking trips to the Rockies during the summer. (Note: My knees don't allow those trips these days, but I hear that there's a special on new knees that I might look into...)

Normally, these trips were taken to what are called "wilderness areas" in Colorado or Wyoming, where there are few man-made improvements and almost no rules for campers.

One year, though, (2009) my sons Ben and Zach and I took a trip to Rocky Mountain National Park, which is NOT a wilderness area.

That backpacking trip differed from our other trips because in a national park, there are rules. At Rocky Mountain National Park, the rules included:

- Use the designated "privy."
- Pitch your tent on a tent pad.
- No campfires in most campsites.
- And - get this - carry a bear-proof canister for your food.

A bear-proof canister takes up space and weighs between two and three pounds. Mine is a three-gallon hard-sided plastic container with a screw top lid and locking tabs.

(On previous models without tabs, the bears would simply unscrew the lid, but they can't deal with the tabs. Opposable thumbs would help. Sorry, bears.)

The park rangers insisted that all our food had to be stuffed into the canisters each night.

Now, was carrying that canister annoying? Yes! But was it also "worth it" for protection's sake? Again, yes. Not our protection. It was worth it to protect the bears.

See, once a bear gets a taste of people food, he wants more of it. He will soon become a pest and bears that become pests have to be put down.

If he is not put down, he'll either harm a camper or he'll starve because he's become domesticated.

There are stories - especially in Yellowstone National Park - of grizzly bears dying by the side of the road in the winter because they have gotten so used to foraging in minivans that they have lost the ability to survive the wilderness.

There is nothing more pitiful than a domesticated bear.

It is tragic to even think that one of the most majestic creatures on the planet could be reduced to begging on the side of the road, stripped of its wildness because that bear took the easy path of grabbing tourists' bologna sandwiches.

If there is anything more pitiful than a domesticated bear, it is a thoroughly domesticated man or woman or young person, because I believe that God intends there be a certain undomesticated wildness about us.

Unpredictability, spontaneity, passion, and fire are all part and parcel of what it means to be fully alive.

(See the third chapter of John's Gospel and note Jesus' words to Nicodemus about the unpredictability of the one who is "**born again / born of the Spirit.**")

You and I weren't made to be tame. Adventure is embedded in our gene pool and taking the road less traveled is our birthright.

And, for Exhibit A of what an adventuresome, untamed servant of God looks like, I submit the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a wild man. He was one of the most compellingly undomesticated characters I've run across in life or literature. In him, we see what it looks like to be truly, wildly, alive to and for God.

Surrounded by a generation of people who did not stand for anything, Jeremiah stood for God.

In a religious society (Jewish) that had forgotten God, he traveled upstream and walked with God, courageously and unpredictably.

In the weeks to come, you and I are going to get to know this remarkable man by exploring some of the book he has left us.¹

Meet Jeremiah

A very long book...

Jeremiah's is a big, long book. Anybody can see that by looking at its fifty-two long chapters.² It is also both timely AND timeless.

Jeremiah wrote during a crucial season of Israel's history. His writing spans the time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, the destruction itself, and the immediate aftermath.³ His book was fit for the times.

¹ Jeremiah didn't arrange his material the way a modern author would have, that is, chronologically. He arranges thematically. The structure of the book of Jeremiah is roughly: Chapters 1-25 - judgment on Judah and Jerusalem; 26-29 - controversy with false prophets; 30-33 - consolation; 34-39 - events from the time of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah; 40-45 - the fall of Jerusalem; 46-51 - oracles about the nations.

² Except for the Psalter (which contains 150 psalms), Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible. Isaiah has more chapters, but Jeremiah has many more words.

³ To fully understand Jeremiah's message, it helps to be familiar with the history of the Jews, especially what is recorded in 2 Kings 21-25 and in 2 Chronicles 33-36.

But Jeremiah also brings us the timeless message of God's grace and of the victory of faith.

His personality permeates every speech, story and prayer recorded in the book. We learn from him as we watch him brood, worry, mourn, exult, and lash out.⁴

In every section of the book, we get to see the honesty and the character and the great heart of the man.⁵

An intriguing personality...

If you wonder, "*Why study the stories we find in Jeremiah's book?*" I would answer that it is Jeremiah - the man himself - that has prompted me to want to open this book with you.

He told the truth, even when the truth was unpopular. He stood against hypocrisy and spoke against religious leaders who were living high on the hog, enjoying the acclaim of society's movers and shakers.

He saw injustice among God's people - and pointed it out and called for repentance. He saw abuse of the poor and the weak and stood up for them.

I'm praying that as we see Jeremiah, we will become, like him, people who are all about God. He went against the flow for God in his day.

By following his lead, we can do the same in our own day, living graciously, serving, and giving and loving in Jesus' Name.

Jeremiah starts off with a three-verse introduction that introduces us to his life and times.

It is also helpful to be familiar with the prophets who ministered contemporaneous with Jeremiah - Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel.

⁴ Some Bible scholars believe that Jeremiah was particularly influenced by Hosea, an earlier prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel.

⁵ The book is a literary masterpiece. Jeremiah writes stories of epic events in simple prose and he writes highly charged poetry.

Background: The life and times of Jeremiah (1:1-3)

[1:1] The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiyah, 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 Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. [3] It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

With these words we are transported from AD 2020 to about 625 BC, from San Antonio to Jerusalem.

And truly, Jeremiah's Jerusalem had seen much better days.

What Israel was CREATED to become

From the very beginning God had set Israel apart to be His witness among the nations.

He chose Abraham to bring blessing to the world. "*Blessed to be a blessing*" was the idea from the get-go.

And, at some points, Israel had been that blessing. Look through Israel's history and you'll find periods of faithFULLness.

More recently, though, the trend had been toward faithLESSness.

What Israel ACTUALLY became

The Reign of Manasseh

When Jeremiah was born, the king on Israel's throne was Manasseh. Old King Manasseh was wrapping up a fifty-five-year reign of terror.

The Bible tells us that ***[2 Chronicles 33:9]...Manasseh misled Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel.***

Manasseh promoted idolatry inside the Jerusalem temple and encouraged ritual prostitution.

He introduced child sacrifice, even making his own son "*pass through the fire*" - a euphemistic way to refer to a horrible act of pagan worship.⁶

Injustice and corruption and violence were rampant during Manasseh's half century on the throne.

The reign of Amon

When Manasseh died, his son, Amon, followed as king. Mercifully, Amon's reign only lasted two years.

But, like father, like son, Amon was every bit as wicked a ruler as Manasseh had been.

King Amon was assassinated by government officials (2 Kings 21), and his death paved the way for a whole new day in Israel with the inauguration of a new king, the eight-year old child-king, Josiah.

A new day dawns with King Josiah and Jeremiah, the prophet

Josiah, the king (2 Kings 22) (640-609 BC)

THE EXTENT OF THE REFORMS...

Thankfully, for some reason, Josiah was not cut out of the same cloth as his father. From childhood, Josiah's heart was soft toward the Lord, not rebellious.⁷

That soft heart toward God is revealed when, after having sat on the throne for several years, a long-lost scroll - the scroll of Deuteronomy! - was found in a closet in the temple.

⁶ 2 Kings 21: 6.

⁷ It may be that Josiah's father, Manasseh, was, at least in part, responsible for Josiah's soft heart toward God. Late in life, Manasseh turned to the Lord, spending the last several years of his life serving God.

The book of Deuteronomy laid out for Israel what kind of living would bring God's blessing, and what would bring His discipline.

When this scroll was read aloud to Josiah, he realized the terrible danger Israel faced for its sinful ways and began to lead a wholesale national reform based on what he read in Deuteronomy.

From the day that he found the scroll forward, Josiah's every act was aimed at promoting true worship and dismantling idolatry.

He banned all sorcery and magic and ordered the cleansing of the temple.⁸

Every reform that a king could bring, Josiah brought.

THE **LIMIT** OF THE REFORMS...

Unfortunately, while the reforms were good, they were a mile wide and an inch deep. It was just so much flag-waving.

What could have been a genuine return to God ended up being nothing more than renewed Jewish nationalism.⁹

His reforms were put in place, but they were externally imposed, not internally owned.¹⁰ The changes Josiah brought may have been all about God for him, but they weren't for the people.

Still needed was the internal change that could only happen as one by one, people dealt with the Lord.

Enter Jeremiah.

⁸ Josiah led in the expansion of the Jewish state into Samaria, Gilead, and along the Mediterranean coast, areas that had been unoccupied by Jews for more than a century. That he was not met with any Assyrian resistance speaks to the weakness of the Assyrian Empire at the time of Josiah's reforms.

⁹ "...we may well wonder whether the great bulk of the people underwent any change in heart at all." (Thompson).

¹⁰ Thompson remarks in his commentary, "*One cannot change people by government regulation.*"

Jeremiah saw through the sham of external conformity. He saw complacency and he took it on, head on.

His ministry launched at about the same time as Josiah's reforms, and for several years, he and Josiah ruled and preached as a team.¹¹

Now, here a few fun things to know and tell about Jeremiah.

Jeremiah, the prophet

NAME

His name was common in Old Testament times and means, in Hebrew, something like "*The Lord exalts!*"¹² That his parents gave him this name speaks of their vision that their son would be used by God.

HOMETOWN OF ANATHOTH

His hometown was Anathoth.¹³ From Anathoth (in the territory of Benjamin), Jeremiah would have been able to see the wall around Jerusalem three miles to the southwest.

Anathoth was a priestly town, having been set aside for the priests hundreds of years earlier when Joshua was dividing the land among the tribes of Israel. (Joshua 21)

And, while Jeremiah's father, Hilkiyah, served as a priest, there is no indication that Jeremiah ever served in a priestly role.

AGE AND TIME SPAN OF MINISTRY

Jeremiah began his ministry in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, which was in 626 BC, and that his prophesying concluded at the time of Jerusalem's exile, which occurred in 586 BC.

¹¹ "In the last decade of the longest, darkest reign in Judah's history, two boys were born who were to be God's gifts to a demoralized and damaged people: Josiah and Jeremiah." (Derek Kidner).

¹² There are seven "Jeremiahs" mentioned in the Bible.

¹³ The modern Arab village of Anata is the site of the ancient Anathoth.

Thus, Jeremiah prophesied for forty solid years.¹⁴

He began speaking at the time of Josiah's reforms and kept at it until Jerusalem lay in ruins.

Jeremiah's book begins with his call to be God's spokesman. And that call starts off with a reassuring word: Jeremiah is completely known by God.

Jeremiah's Initial Call and Commission (1:4-10)

God's Call to Jeremiah (vv. 4-5)

Intimate knowledge

**[4] Now the word¹⁵ of the Lord came to me saying,
[5] "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you"**

Genetics did not primarily shape Jeremiah. Environment did not mainly mold him. From the beginning - and before the beginning - God was at work "**forming**" him.¹⁶

The same is true for each of us today. We are each formed by the hand of God for purposes He has for us.

To think rightly about ourselves and others is to recognize that no one is simply a random collection of atoms. Each person is a purposeful creation of Almighty God.

Or, as we love to say it, all human life is sacred.

The most severely disabled and diseased, the life in its final stages and - as Jeremiah affirms - the life in the womb are all sacred.

¹⁴ Assuming that his ministry began in 626 BC, this was also the year in which the Assyrian King, Ashurbanipal, died, signaling the soon-to-come collapse of Assyria.

¹⁵ "Word" = *dabar* (Hebrew) = word/event. Both the preached word and the symbolic acts Jeremiah performed are in view here as coming from the Lord.

¹⁶ King David wrote the same truths hundreds of years earlier in Psalm 139.

May we be known in our own day as the people who affirm the sanctity of life in the womb by our prayers, by our service in Crisis Pregnancy Centers, by our fostering and adoption, and by our love for women in challenging pregnancies.

God knows the life in the womb in 2020 and He knew Jeremiah, before he was born.

But God wasn't finished. There is the comforting truth that God knew Jeremiah.

And God had a mission for him, a speaking mission.

Global commission

**[5b] "And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed¹⁷ you a prophet to the nations."**

Of course, we all speak. God commissioned Jeremiah to speak globally, to the worldwide community.

Contextualize this commission to 2020 and you'll be thinking of speaking to the United Nations or to the G-7. You're holding private talks with world leaders - some friendly, most not so much. Daunting.

Jeremiah's thoughts would have turned to Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Philistia, Syria, the world powers of his day.

He won't speak to them as an equally powerful political leader. He will speak to them as God's prophet, the powerful outsider, the disrupter. Talk about daunting.

And the exact wording is remarkable. God says that he has "*given*" Jeremiah to the nations.

Jeremiah was never consulted about his being "*given*" to the nations. God simply decided to give him away. God can do that.

¹⁷ Hebrew "*natan*" = "to give." (or, sometimes, as here "anointed")

God can give commands to His people without their consent. He can commission Jonah to go to Nineveh and you to make disciples and Jeremiah to be prophet to the nations.

God has the right to do all of that. But how do you think you would have processed this message from God had you been Jeremiah?

Well, listen as he processes.

Jeremiah's Self-Doubt (v. 6)

[6] Then I said, "Alas, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth."

When he heard God's commission, Jeremiah was overwhelmed.

That's understandable given the scope of the commission and even more understandable when we consider that at the time of this commissioning, if our chronology is correct, Jeremiah was mid- to late-teens, early twenties at the oldest.¹⁸

He's looking for a way out. He's way too young, insecure, and unsure about all of this. And I can't say as I blame him.

After all, lots of biblical characters were nervous about carrying out God's mission.

Most famously, Moses, the great lawgiver, pleaded with God to find someone else to go to Pharaoh - and Moses was eighty years old when God called him at the burning bush.

Have you ever struggled with insecurities about the assignments God has given you? I have.

- He has commissioned me and every husband here to sacrificially cherish his wife. Every wife here is commissioned to love and respect her husband.
- All parents have been commissioned to teach and to train their children in God's ways.
- Every employee is to work hard, as unto the Lord; every boss is to treat workers with dignity; every citizen is to submit to governing authorities; every ruler is to rule with justice.

And every Christian has been commissioned to love fellow believers with God's love, lovingly share the Gospel with those who don't yet know Jesus, and to make disciples.

These are our commissions from God.

And if you are uneasy about fulfilling those commissions, because you're too young / poor / inexperienced / busy / small / weak / unimportant / unpopular - you're part of a very big club.

But, to God, none of Jeremiah's uneasinesses - or ours - mattered. Listen. The Lord gives His newest prophet a gentle rebuke.

God's Solution (vv. 7-10)

Focused on a divine command (vv. 7-8)

Stop focusing on your lack (v. 7)

[7a] But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,'"

Was Jeremiah unqualified? Sure. God said that his lack of a resume was irrelevant.

Did God give Jeremiah an impossible charge? Yep. That's what God does. He gives us tasks that are beyond us.

But what God wanted from Jeremiah was not superhuman performance. He wanted total surrender to a command. He was looking for submission, for obedience, for commitment to a transcendent task.

¹⁸ The call of God came to him in the 13th year of Josiah's reign (627 BC), at which time Josiah was 21 years old and Jeremiah was, in his own words, a "na'ar" (a general Hebrew word for a young person). Probably younger than Josiah.

***[7b] Because everywhere I send you, you shall go,
And all that I command you, you shall speak.***

Jeremiah didn't get to choose the location of his mission - he would go wherever God sent him.

Jeremiah didn't get to choose his audience - he would go to whomever God sent him.

He learns here that the proper question following God's commission is not, "How could I possibly do that?" but "When do I start?"

His commission won't take him to safe places. His people will reject him. He'll be denied the comfort and joys of family life. He'll suffer hardship and will repeatedly face danger.

So, God's next words are fitting.

Start relying on God's power (v. 8)

***[8] "Do not be afraid of them,
For I am with you to deliver you," declares the Lord.***

Jeremiah actually had something to be afraid of because his obedience to God would lead him into risky places. He will jump into the deep end of the pool, just like others have who have obeyed God.

The current story on the frontpage of the Voice of the Martyrs website tells of Christians in many villages in the Central African Republic who have been killed or driven into hiding by Islamist extremists.

They are suffering for their outspoken witness for Jesus.

They are offering forgiveness and love to their persecutors. They continue to faithfully follow the Lord. They are trusting Him to meet their needs and "to deliver" them - just like Jeremiah did.

And we have a whole catalogue listing those who did the same things in biblical times, before and after Jeremiah. (Hebrews 11)

Jeremiah's story alerts us to the reality that obeying God can get us into trouble.

But God promised Jeremiah that He would be with him and that He would deliver him - and He did.

God's way is often not to stop the fight or even to intervene, but to stand beside the fighter. For forty years, no matter what anyone threw at him or how often he suffered, God stood with him and kept him going.

Sure, in the end, Jeremiah died, just as we all will. And at that moment, God delivered him from this life into a glorious eternity.

The message? Jeremiah, there is no need to fear. God is with you and God is for you.

Obviously, that is God's message to His people in every age. No need for me to fear. No fear for you to fear. God is with us. He is for us.

Jeremiah's age and my age, my weakness and your weakness don't matter.

And with that, the Lord anointed Jeremiah's lips, the final sign that he had received everything he needed to do what God had given him to do.¹⁹

Equipped with a divine anointing and mandate (vv. 9-10)

***[9] Then the Lord stretched out His hand and touched my mouth,
and the Lord said to me,
"Behold, I have put My words in your mouth."²⁰
[10] "See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over
the kingdoms,
To pluck up and to break down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant."***

¹⁹ See Appendix for a brief treatment of the two visions of chapter 1, given to encourage Jeremiah in his mission.

²⁰ There is a picture of God touching the mouths of Isaiah and Ezekiel, too.

Wow. Talk about a tough mission. This would be tough for anyone of any age or station in life. For a teenager? Definitely.

Over the course of his life with God, Jeremiah will give out more rebuke than affirmation, more negativity than positive strokes. And over the next decades, he will prove faithful to his mission.

For the servant of God, that's the thing. Be faithful. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:2 that it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

And this is where Jeremiah's life and ours intersect.

He was a steward of the message God gave him to proclaim. We are stewards of the message of Jesus.

And get this. We serve the same God Jeremiah served, but our message is more powerful, more hopeful, more joyful, more better.

He was sent to proclaim judgment to a rebellious Israel for generations of wickedness. They had broken the covenant and destruction was coming.

He was sent to proclaim judgment to the nations for their sin.

Our message is a promise of life from death. We tell the people we know and love that Jesus, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world, has come.

He died on a Roman cross for our sin and rose from the dead, victorious. He now offers life, abundant and eternal, to all those who believe in Him.

We walk across a room and across a street to deliver this message. We send and we give and we go to the nations to tell them of a Savior who changes everything.

The message we share is better and the promises we have received under Jesus' New Covenant are better, too.

We each have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We have the support and strength that comes from our brothers and sisters in Jesus. We have the words and teachings of Jesus to guide us.

So, if Jeremiah was equipped with what he needed to be faithful to his mission, you and I are super-equipped to be faithful to ours.

The conclusion to this commission finds God speaking to Jeremiah like a general speaks to his troops.

Jeremiah's Re-Commissioning (1:17-19)

[17] "Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them. [18] "Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land. [19] "They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you," declares the Lord.

The life God chose for Jeremiah and the life he embraced wasn't easy and it certainly wasn't always fun. But it was a **LIFE**.

It wasn't tame and he was never reduced to a cookie-cutter copy of what others thought he should have been doing.

There was always a feral wildness about him, submitted to the God he knew. And that led to a life of abundance. He points the way for us, today, who long for the abundant life Jesus offers us.

And we have more in common than we might have thought.

In this first chapter we discover that God has known Jeremiah, (1:5a - Hebrew *yada*), has consecrated him (1:5b - Hebrew *qadosh*), and has given him to the nations. (1:5c - Hebrew *natan*)

You are a believer in Jesus. Almighty God knows (*yada*) everything about you.

Everything you have suffered, every time you've been victimized, every righteous act, and every time you've taken advantage of someone else or in any other way have sinned, He knows it all.

And you have been consecrated (*qadosh*) to serve Him.

The New Testament refers to you as a "saint" - a holy one, somebody who's set apart for a special assignment for Jesus. God has prepared good works in which only you can walk.

You have also been given (*natan*).

Just as God gave His only begotten Son to the world, so He has now given His sons and daughters to the world.

We have been given to love and to serve in His Name, to bring blessing to the world, share the Good News that has set you free, and to make disciples.

APPENDIX: THE TWO VISIONS GIVEN TO JEREMIAH AT THE START OF HIS MINISTRY (Jeremiah 1:11-16)

First Vision: Almond Tree

[11] The word of the Lord came to me saying, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said, "I see a rod of an almond tree." [12] Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it."

The first vision is of an almond tree, something with which Jeremiah would have been very familiar, since his hometown of Anathoth was famous for its almond crop. (As is the Arab village of today.)

The most striking thing about Middle Eastern almond trees is that they are the first tree to bud in the spring in Palestine. When the almond tree sprouts new leaves and flowers, you know that spring is just around the corner.

The vision of the almond tree was God's promise that He would see to the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecies. Just as the early bursting into bloom of the almond tree heralded springtime, so the spoken word of Jeremiah would point to its rapid fulfillment.

Second Vision Boiling Pot

[13] The word of the Lord came to me a second time saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north." [14] Then the Lord said to me, "Out of the north the evil will break forth on all the inhabitants of the land. [15] "For, behold, I am calling all the families of the kingdoms of the north," declares the Lord; "and they will come and they will set each one his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all its walls round about and against all the cities of Judah. [16] "I will pronounce My judgments on them concerning all their wickedness, whereby they have forsaken Me and have offered sacrifices to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands.

The image is clear. A pot sits on the coals of a fire. The pot tilts slightly, boils over, and drains southward.

This vision assured Jeremiah that judgment was coming on Judah and Jerusalem, and the destroyer will come from the north. We know that this northern destroyer was Babylon.

Whether or not Jeremiah would have understood that the destroyer would be Babylon at this time is unclear. Babylon was, after all, not quite the world dominant power it would become twenty years hence. But Israel's enemies had historically come against them from the north, including Assyria.

Equipped with these two visions Jeremiah knows that destruction is coming - he need never doubt it, and that the Lord will honor him by fulfilling the prophetic words that he speaks in God's Name.