

You Have What It Takes

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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What are you **afraid** of? Really, what makes your palms sweat and your heart race and your mind conjure up the worst possible scenarios? What makes you scream or, even worse, lose your voice altogether? What keeps you awake at night? We live our lives in relative safety – but still we are afraid. What are you afraid of?

Studies show that we're afraid of all kinds of things. The top ten reported fears are, in reverse order: confined spaces (claustrophobia), thunder and lightning, open spaces, flying, people or social situations, heights, darkness, spiders – the number two fear reported by people today is the fear of death. And what could possibly top the fear of death but the fear of public speaking? Glossophobia, or the more politically correct term, "speech anxiety," reportedly affects 75% of adults between the age of 18 and 56. It attacks men and women equally. This fear ruins or stalls careers, it keeps people up at night, it causes digestive issues and other physical ailments. People have begun taking beta blockers before speeches or undergoing hypnosis to keep themselves calm. Can *you* relate? Are you afraid of public speaking? Does the very idea of giving a speech give you hives?

Jeremiah was afraid, too. He was called to be a prophet, to speak God's word to God's people, at a tough time in history, a time of turmoil and upheaval. The Babylonians were taking over and Israel's political alliances were split: Jerusalem was in trouble and in Jeremiah's lifetime the city would fall. The people were in exile, and their lives and faith were in question. Jeremiah himself lost everything during his career as a prophet – he had plenty of reason to be afraid. But as he looked back on his calling in the text we heard Pam read this morning, as he remembered hearing God's voice speaking into his life – with the clarity that retrospect provides – Jeremiah remembered being afraid that, as a young person with little experience, he would have nothing to say. Or he would say the wrong thing and the people to whom he was speaking would revolt against him and hurt or even kill him.

Jeremiah's story resonates with us in so many ways: not because we're all called to be prophets, but because all of us have been called into God's service in *some* way, and all of us have had excuses to offer: "I'm too young, I don't know what to do, I'm really quite too busy to participate right now" – but God's response to us is the same as God's response to Jeremiah: "Don't be afraid; you have what it takes because I have given it to you. I've prepared you for this since before you were born. Go ahead and speak: I've put my own words in your mouth."

Now it wouldn't be easy for Jeremiah – the message he was called to give was not a happy message, though it was ultimately a hopeful one. The word Jeremiah had to speak and the things Jeremiah encountered were not all wine and roses. But Jeremiah had what he needed to be faithful, despite his youth and inexperience, because he let God speak through him. He had what it took to be one of the greatest prophets in history simply because he was willing to follow the God who had promised to equip him for that work.

I think, to some extent, it's like ballroom dancing. Now I don't have a ton of experience with ballroom dancing, and I don't even watch *Dancing With the Stars* on TV, but Steven and I did take a few lessons before we got married and I learned a lot during those weeknights in the

dance studio. See, the woman in a ballroom dancing pair has to know what she's doing – she has to know the steps – but even more importantly, she has to trust her partner. The woman dances backward, you see. She can't see where she's going. I stink at ballroom dancing because I want to look behind me and make sure I'm not going to trip over something. I have trouble following, even when the one I am following is the most trustworthy party I know. And maybe following our call is a little bit like that role in dancing: we have to practice, yes, but mostly we have to give in to our leader and trust that we will be provided with whatever we will need.

I remember not too many years ago seeing “No Fear” stickers on the back of people's cars, on t-shirts, hats and wristbands. Do you remember that trend? The words “No Fear” had these eyes over them – very narrow, kind of scary-looking eyes. It was as if putting that logo on your shirt or your car made you tougher. It felt as if people were adopting this motto to convince not only the world but also themselves that they weren't afraid – afraid of what? I don't know. But they were announcing to the world, “I have no fear! In fact, *you* can be afraid of *me*, because I am not afraid of anything!”

In a way, this can almost seem biblical: the exhortation for us not to fear is one of the most repeated in the Bible. “Do not fear,” God says. “Don't be afraid.” But the “No fear” stickers are a little different for one reason: when God says not to fear in the Bible, as he told Jeremiah not to be afraid of his calling, it's not because we are better than others, tougher than our enemies, or intrinsically strong enough to laugh in the face of fear. God tells Jeremiah not to fear – and extends that reassurance to us – because God has already given us whatever we need. We have no reason to fear because our God is a God who provides. We have no reason to fear because whatever God is calling us to, God is giving us the tools for. Whether it's speaking truth as a prophet, serving the poor, tending the sick, sharing our lives in hospitality, welcoming the stranger, cultivating the earth, teaching the children, sharing our artistic abilities, building up the house of God – whatever it is God is calling us to, God will equip us and has been preparing us since before our first breath. And then beyond that, God promises to be with us always – we will never be alone. And that is why we have nothing to fear.

I've told you a bit about my own call story, realizing that God was calling me to be a pastor but maybe I haven't told you that I first discerned that call to full-time ministry my first year in college, but I didn't actually accept it until two years later, because I was afraid I couldn't make a living being a pastor full-time. Maybe I haven't told you that even when I arrived at seminary, I told people I wasn't sure what I was called to, but I was certain I would not be a local church pastor – a military or hospital chaplain, maybe, a music minister, a camp director, a youth pastor or Christian education director – but not the pastor of a local church. And if I was honest, it was because I was terrified – *terrified* – of preaching. It was probably a little bit of glossophobia – fear of public speaking – but even more than that, I was terrified of not having anything to say. The pastor's job, after all, is to hear a word from God and deliver it to the people. What if I did it wrong? What if I didn't hear from God? What would the people do if they didn't get the appointed message? The stakes were too high and the task too difficult. I was afraid. So I tried to convince myself that I was called to something else.

But the summer after my first year of seminary I did an internship at a 5000-member church in San Antonio, where I was told I could try whatever I wanted in the church – I could dabble in small group ministry, hospital visitation, children's Sunday School, whatever I was

interested in – I was there to learn, after all. But three things were non-negotiable: I would preach in the Wednesday night chapel service, I would preach in the contemporary service in the gym, and I would preach all three services in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. It was a long drive from Durham, NC to San Antonio, TX, and I cried about half the way. I was terrified.

When the day came for my first sermon, in a Wednesday evening chapel service in front of about 100 people, I couldn't eat all day. I had spent weeks preparing my manuscript, and I was truly inspired by it, so I hoped the congregation would be, too, but I still was afraid. I preached that night for *way too long*, and one person fell asleep. But I made it: I survived. I didn't fall down, I didn't throw up - and more than that, it turned out that I *did* have something to say, because I let God speak through me. And the next time I preached, in front of 1800 in the sanctuary, 3 times in a row, God gave me words again. And I didn't pass out or fall down or die. When I left San Antonio that summer, I still wasn't 100% sure about my professional call, but I no longer had to count out a whole world of possibilities because of fear. I knew that God would provide whatever I needed if I was willing to be used.

What is it that God is calling you to? Where is God leading you? What is moving deep in your soul? What excuses are you giving? Are you too young? Too old? Too busy? Too poor? Too tired? Just not ready? For what task have you said, "I could never do *that*..." Because if God is calling you, God has promised to give you whatever you need. For Jeremiah, when he didn't know what to say to this divided nation in the midst of political upheaval, this people who had lost their very way of worshiping, when he didn't have words, God gave Jeremiah God's own words to speak – all he had to do was open his mouth and the word of God would come out. He had everything he need because he followed – he let God use him.

The same is true for each of us, and for us as a church. There is no need for us to dream and imagine and then start with our list of excuses: there's no need for us to say, "But we're just a little church. We have debts to pay off. We don't have enough volunteers. We're in a transition year. We're just finishing this big project. We don't have enough space. We're too small, too tired, too hidden in the woods." When God calls us, there are no excuses we can offer that God cannot answer. And in fact, God has been preparing us to answer the call since before this church was even born. Whether it's reaching into the city to minister to the lost, partnering with local schools to help the children, reaching out to families, assisting the elderly in our neighborhood, inviting our neighbors to church – whatever God may be calling us to, whatever we discern as a community is the next step for us toward making disciples of Jesus Christ, God has already started preparing us for that thing. And if we will let God use us, while our task may still be difficult, we can take part in the transformation of the world. We have what it takes to tell the world about the God whose love reigns over all, because our God is a God who provides.

Look again at the verbs in Jeremiah's call story. God says, "I formed you, I knew you, I consecrated you, I appointed you." "But I'm only a boy... I don't how to speak," Jeremiah says. So God continues: "I send you, I command you, I am with you, I will deliver you. Do not be afraid." And God says the same to us today: don't be afraid. You have what it takes. I've already given you everything you need. Amen.