

Peter Wiley  
 Jeremiah 1:4-10  
 Hudson  
 8-26-07

## INTRODUCTION:

This morning's lectionary takes us to the beginning of the book of Jeremiah. But before reading the passage, it's good to remember what Methodist Bishop Will Willimon reminds us about this passage. Willimon says that while we call it the "book of Jeremiah" . . . we might do better to call it the "Book of God," because the words Jeremiah shares aren't his at all. Jeremiah confesses right from the start that he has nothing to say. All the words are God's. A God who chose him even before birth.

A true prophet's words don't begin with something the prophet has to say coming from within him. It's not self-derived. It's an intrusion of God's word coming through him. Right from the start, we're reminded it isn't Jeremiah's great wisdom. Rather it is his willingness to hear and express God.

*SCRIPTURE: 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." 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 overthrow, to build and to plant."*

**SERMON:** Last week I returned from two weeks away with my family. Fourteen days where we drove two thousand miles, went swimming in six different lakes beaches & bays, kayaked, sailed, water-skied, went on seven different boats, walked the beach, biked, hiked, ran, picked berries, blew glass, ate a lot of fudge, read, wrote and played some tennis. And that was just the first day . . .! That's what we've always done when we travel. What surprised me . . . was that by the end of the day – I got tired. Really tired. And then William would push to go out into the night. Throw a football in the dark or take another walk on the beach. And I would tell him no . . . we needed to get some sleep so we'd be ready for the next day. And *he* would say to me, "But it's vacation." And that's when I knew it -- I must be getting older. No longer able to do what I did when I was a boy. No longer willing to take that risk of doing a little more.

Now I know some of you are cringing. You're thinking: *Old . . . you're not old at all.* And you're right. But age is a relative thing. It's about how we see the world. Our openness to looking at life in new ways, fresh thinking and taking risks. In this way, some people are very old at age ten . . . and some are still very young at eighty or ninety.

Remember what happened at the beginning of Jeremiah? God called Jeremiah to be a prophet. To share wisdom with the nations. To speak truth and offer God's new word.

And what did Jeremiah say?:

*O God . . . you know I can't speak . . . I'm just a boy.* I'm too young, too green, too naïve. Go find yourself a more seasoned guy.

But God says, *Don't say, 'I am only a boy.'* A lot of people interpret this to mean that even the least among us, the young, the slow, the inexperienced, the not so quick or wise . . . even they have something they can give. Everybody has something to offer. Nice message. But I'm not so sure that's what this is about.

Do you think God just might be saying: "Don't say I am only a boy," because being a boy – a child, youthful – was exactly what God was looking for . . . was exactly what God needed. Nobody else would do except for a child. Except for somebody who didn't think he already had it all figured out. Somebody who would risk believing, had the nerve to see something new, was willing to go and check it out.

Have you ever noticed how many of the people who have truly changed the world, caused real change and new thinking, shifted us into a new reality -- were pretty young? Think about it.

How old was Martin Luther King jr.? Thirty-nine when he died, just thirty-four when he spoke of his dream that proved to be the catalyst for a real rethinking of the way we look at one another.

How about Thomas Jefferson? Barely thirty-three when he wrote that Declaration of Independence – a true impetus to reshape and re-understand what it means to be gathered as a nation.

Even the most powerful Kings . . . Alexander the Great rose to the throne at about twenty and went on to conquer most of the known world. Napoleon was just thirty-five. And Frederick the Great just twenty-eight. Even the greatest king of the Hebrew scriptures, David rose to leadership in his youth and became king at around 30.

Mozart was thirteen when he produced one of his first great works. Just thirty-five when he died. The same is true with so many artists.

The biggest innovators of our time? This week's cover of Newsweek has a picture of Mark Zuckerman – now twenty-three. He started *Facebook* at nineteen! Relationships will never be the same. The same is true for the Google guys, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.

Think of it. According to scripture Mary was just a young teen when she dared believe the unbelievable – that she'd give birth to the one who would change the world. And her son, Jesus was just thirty when he entered the public stage and thirty three at death.

What do they all have in common? A willingness to see the world through new eyes. To not get stuck in what's already known and believed. There have been older prophets . . . but they've all had that youthful nature of being ready to believe something new.

Do you remember how Galileo offered proof for what some had been saying for a long time: that the earth is not at the center of the universe. And he offered them the chance to see for themselves and take a look through his telescope. But there were a lot of people who not only refused to believe . . . they were so stuck in what they thought they already knew that they refused to even take a peek. (Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, p. 31)

Jeremiah said: *O God . . . you know I can't speak . . . I'm just a boy. Don't you want somebody who knows his way around the block? Who's learned, has a knowledge of the world?* "No," says God. "The world is filled with plenty of people who think they've got it all figured out. I need somebody who can see something new. I need a boy like you."

When we were in Wisconsin a few weeks ago, we got the chance to tour a replica of the Nina – one of the boats Columbus sailed to the new world. In 1492 almost everyone on the adventure was a teenager (the risk takers) . . . except Columbus who was about forty. You know how the story goes. Europe was desperately trying to move out of the middle ages. And Europeans had developed an insatiable thirst for the silks and spices of the Far East . . . but they had no easy route to get them. So Columbus went against conventional wisdom and headed west in an attempt to go east. Like a child, he willingly went against what was agreed to be possible and sought to do what was thought not to be able to be done. And in the process he ran into a big hunk of land that nobody knew was there (except the people who already lived there – of course!).

And this is the amazing part – even those who were thinking way outside the box didn't understand what they had found. Their next effort became trying to get *around* the Western hemisphere so they could make it to the orient. In fact it took European civilization more than two centuries to realize that what they'd found – the Americas – was far more important than what they'd been seeking. But they wouldn't have figured it out at all if they'd stuck with what they already thought they knew. (Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, p. 35)

I think God chose Jeremiah because his imagination was still free enough to believe – because he was a boy. And that's probably the reason why – when Jesus was asked who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven – he pulled a child out of the crowd and said this is what they're like.

Fredrick Buechner said it like this: *Jesus was saying that the people who get into heaven are people who, like children, don't worry too much. They are people who, like children, live with their hands open more than with their fists clenched. They are people who, like children, are so relatively unburdened by preconceptions that if somebody says there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they are perfectly willing to go and take a look for themselves.* (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 13)

I like that. It's not about being a child. It's not a romanticizing of the young. It's remembering the true gift of youth. They're far brighter than we often believe they are. And their minds aren't closed, set in their ways. Contrary to popular belief, youth are less likely to think they've got it all figured out than the rest of us.

That's the sort of spirit Richard brings to Youth Ministry. He takes each one seriously knowing they aren't a finished slate . . . and that they have so much to offer. How do you nurture the spirit of the young?

You listen to them.

You learn from them.

You believe in them.

. . . and you let them open your eyes to God right now.

We could do a whole lot worse than to be led by our youth . . . we could do a whole lot worse than to be led by the likes of Jeremiah.

That's why we *do* take our youth so seriously around here.

That's why we call a youth minister to be in our midst.

And that's why we bring Richard to you today.

Because our youth matter . . . a lot. And even more, our youth have a word to offer us that you and I need to hear. [p]

So what do we take from this passage today?

I hope if nothing else . . . I hope if nothing else, that our youth *DO* have a word to offer . . . and that we'd do well to listen more openly, a bit more willingly to hearing a new and prophetic word in our midst.