

Epiphany 04 C 2022
January 30, 2022 :: Jeremiah 1:4-10
Fr. Jim Cook

“Let’s go!”

When I first saw our reading Jeremiah, a certain feeling of déjà-vu came over me. For the words of the prophet Jeremiah, that is, “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy,” sounded so familiar. Because it reminded me of how many times, as a priest, I have said to God, “Lord, I don’t know how to do this.”

I want to talk this morning about prophets, and what it means to be a prophet. Because I think that when we understand better what it is to be a prophet — especially one such as Jeremiah — then we can come to a better understanding of one aspect of what it is to be a Christian.

When I first began reading up on Jeremiah, I quickly began to realize that the image of the Old Testament prophet that I had held for so long was being challenged. The Jeremiah that I read about was not at all what I expected.

Jeremiah was called at a time in Israel’s history when that nation was in turmoil. Politically, its leadership was corrupt.

Socially, all type of injustice and inhumane behavior became all too common. And, religiously, they began worshiping foreign gods.

Called to be a prophet at that time, Jeremiah certainly took pains to point out what was amiss with Israel — to point out where she had fallen short, and to warn her what would be the result of her actions. This I expected. But what I didn't expect was that, throughout all of his warnings, Jeremiah also pleaded for Israel to turn back; he pleaded for her to change her ways; he pleaded for her to repent.

And when you read his writings, it's clear that he had strong feelings of despair and frustration for what he saw taking place. It's clear also that Jeremiah felt, in many ways, inadequate for the task set before him.

What I also didn't expect was that, when Israel had finally hit rock bottom — when she had been completely defeated, and her citizens carried off into exile — Jeremiah didn't stand there and wag his finger and say, "I told you so." Even though Israel had rejected his pleas and warnings, Jeremiah did not reject Israel.

And so, and when things were at their worst, Jeremiah began his work of helping Israel to rebuild herself, and restore her sense of identity as a people of God. There are, perhaps, no passages quite so tender or loving than the restoration prophecies of Jeremiah. There, Jeremiah spoke words of compassion, and hope, and promise. Jeremiah spoke words that proclaimed that although Israel had deserted God, God had not deserted Israel. And that's what Jeremiah the prophet did.

Here's the thing: By virtue of our baptism, we have also been commissioned to behave like the prophets of God to this generation. However, and like Jeremiah, it's very likely that most of us may feel inadequate for the task that is put before us.

Like Jeremiah we may be reluctant to say "yes" to God, and look for reasons to excuse ourselves from this task. I'm too young. I'm too old. I don't know enough about the Bible. What have you. But God says to us, just as he said to Jeremiah, "Don't be afraid of them" — the New Jerusalem Bible translates it this way, "Don't be afraid of confronting them" — "for I am with you to deliver you."

You see, if we are willing to put forth the time and effort, God can enable us to behave like his prophets. To say “yes” to our commission is to place our trust in someone other than ourselves, and that is not the easiest thing to do.

However, we are called to this ministry, and our decision is vitally important. It’s impossible to guess what would have happened if Jeremiah had said “no” to God. But we do know that immeasurable good resulted from his willingness to trust God, and from his willingness to take that risk.

So, what does it mean to behave like a prophet? Sometimes it may mean that we will have to risk confronting people with their harmful or destructive behavior. This means that we have to be certain of where we stand, and be certain that where we stand is correct.

It means also having enough courage to stand up and speak out for what you know is right, and good, and just. And that’s not an easy task if, like me, you don’t like being the heavy once in a while.

However, behaving like a prophet also means that we are willing to be supportive and encouraging to those whose lives have come apart, for whatever reason. It means that we don't say to those whose decisions have ruined their lives, "Well, you've made your bed, now you have to sleep in it." This is not to say that we relieve them of the consequences of their actions, but rather that we are willing to help them learn from their mistakes, and help them to begin rebuilding their lives.

And, finally, behaving like a prophet means that we are willing to help people realize God's promises for their lives; promises of peace and hope; promises of a new life and new possibilities; promises that our future can be better than our past and present.

Behaving like a prophet means taking a stand; it means being willing to take risks; it means possibly placing ourselves in uncomfortable positions. But as God promised to go with Jeremiah, he also promises to go with us. Let's not forget what God said to Jeremiah, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you ... I have put my words in your mouth."

God calls us to behave like prophets. He calls us into action. He calls us to direct the best of our resources and abilities into his service. He calls us to go out, and he promises to go out with us. So ... Let's go!

Amen.