

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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 to overthrow,
to build and to plant.'

Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

“I Am with You to Deliver You”

I grew up in the day before X-Box, before Wii, before PCs or laptops, and let me tell you, it is amazing what the games you can play these days. I grew up with pinball machines, and pinball machines were expensive; maybe five balls for a quarter. Video games were more expensive, maybe fifty cents a game. And I didn't play that often because I couldn't afford to. It wasn't worth it for me to spend five dollars playing these games, because the games would end very quickly – occasionally I'd win a free game, but at the end of the day, the machines would be \$5 richer and I would not be any better off.

So when one of my housemates in college took on a job as a video arcade manager and would invite me and my other housemate to play arcade games for free after the arcade had closed, well that was a no-brainer. All the games you wanted to play on any machine for as long as you'd like. My GPA declined a bit that year because I could spend hours playing video games, and loving the fact that I could lose with no real consequence; I could be killed in an instant and push the new game button and I was back in business.

But life is not a game, is it? At least it's not a game where you can lose indefinitely and push a button to start all over again. Life has real risks, and we weigh those risks carefully before we make a move. We weigh our decisions carefully and choose the options that offer us the greatest payoff or the least risk usually. Think of how deeply we consider who we marry, where we work, where we live, who we vote for. We know that a wrong decision can have long-term consequences; if we make a bad choice, we can't just push a button and start a new game.

Most of the time such decisions are quite easy to make, but once in awhile, in some circumstances, we have a conflict between doing something that we sense is the will of God and doing something that is not the will of God, and the reason we have a conflict is because choosing to do God's will seems like a greater risk. This is the dilemma that Jeremiah faces in our Old Testament reading. Jeremiah is given the inauspicious task of speaking on behalf of God, and he is not thrilled with the prospect. Why not? Because speaking the word of God will most certainly get him in hot water with people who are not doing what God wants them to do, and those people are dangerous! God wants folks to love one another and care for one another; often those who are not doing the will of God are actively doing the opposite - rather than caring for others they are taking advantage of others, even killing others. And God wants Jeremiah to tell such people that they are being naughty. How will those people respond? Well if they are not afraid of God, if they're not afraid to kill their enemies, they won't be afraid of Jeremiah. Jeremiah fears for his life, and that is why he tells God, “I'm only a boy.”

We often take the same line of defense. When we see something that's just wrong, that is so opposed to what God wishes and desires for his people, we too may be afraid to say anything. Like Jeremiah we may say, “I'm only a boy...only a teacher, only a musician, only a hairdresser, only a you-name-it.” We appeal to God, telling him that we are not suitable for the task at hand. We say that we are not qualified, but the real reason we resist doing as the Holy Spirit is prompting us to do is that we are afraid. We might not end up getting killed or even put in jail, but we stand the risk of losing something – our money, our property, our title our power – and we have assessed the risk and decided that we are better off NOT doing the will of God.

And our decision betrays the fact that a great chasm exists between us and God, a chasm we can call sin, and the essence of sin is a lack of faith. Somewhere along the road of human history, we stopped trusting God – the book of Genesis depicts this calamity as our Fall in the Garden of Eden; man and woman stopped believing God, and so they took matters into their own hands, and since that time we have had a difficult time truly trusting in God. And with the loss of trust in God, we have stopped seeing things from God's perspective, a

perspective of eternity and infinity, and instead we see things from a finite, limited perspective. We think of the world as finite in resources, and so we seek to obtain more out of fear that there isn't enough for everyone. We gravitate to safety and security because we think of life as finite, eighty or ninety years of life, and so we are reluctant to do anything that would risk shortening our time on the planet.

But I'm here to tell you that obeying God, doing what he wants you to do, saying what he wants you to say, is the safest thing you could ever do, because God loves us and always has and always will. God protects us, not from death in this life - no one is protected from that - but from death of our soul, from the kind of death that occurs precisely when we are so far removed from God that we forget what makes life so precious, which is love of God and love of others. God has to remind Jeremiah of this truth; Jeremiah fears the consequences of telling those in power the truth (that is, God's word) and he gives the excuse that he is only a boy. "Do not tell me you are only a boy," God replies. You know God can do anything he wants with anyone he wants, including a boy, so that's no excuse for Jeremiah. God reassures him, saying, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you."

We see this truth again borne out in our Gospel lesson, only Jesus, who has just returned from 40 days in the wilderness and is filled with the Holy Spirit, doesn't hesitate in saying what God wants him to say. He begins as a crowd pleaser as people marvel at the hometown boy who is so gifted and smart. They're looking forward to seeing Jesus do amazing things in Nazareth. But then Jesus tells them what they don't want to hear, that God has a history of doing greater things with Gentiles than he was doing with the Jews. And the people don't take kindly to this; they nearly drive Jesus off a cliff.

But somehow Jesus passes through their midst unharmed. Luke doesn't go into detail here, but this is a miracle story. How does a despised man walk through an angry mob unscathed? The answer is with the help of God, who promises "I am with you to deliver you." Hear the word of God, God who wants us to stop trusting in ourselves and trust in him, because when we trust in our limited selves we can't help but fear all the things that we cannot do anything about. There are no such limits with God, and so there is no need for us to fear anything. We all face physical death, whether we are killed in an accident or we succumb to an illness or we die of old age. But through Jesus Christ God has shown us the result of trusting in him, and that is resurrection and eternal life.

Can we begin to place a little more trust in God, so that we not only hear his voice but respond appropriately to it? That's the challenge I leave you with. You have all heard God's voice in various ways, whether it be by way of scripture or by that little voice in your head that you call conscience. The Holy Spirit speaks to us clearly and often, and the trick is not hearing it; the trick is doing what it tells us to do, and we can only do that when we put our trust in a God who can give life as well as take it. If we trust in God we can play this game of life always knowing that there is another life once the game is over, God pushes that "eternal life" button. The greatest risk we take is not in obeying God's will but in defying God's will, because God intends for us to live an abundant life and an eternal life, and as hard as we may try and as much as we may accumulate, we can't make those promises to ourselves. Trust in God's word. Trust in his ability to deliver you from any calamity. Live your life in that security, and know the blessing that comes from walking in his presence.