

SERMON TITLE: "A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Boy Who Could Speak for God"  
SERMON TEXT: Jeremiah 1:1-19  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: September 20, 2020, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1956, my mom graduated from high school in the small town of Libby, Montana. By graduating in the top 10% of her senior class, she earned the right to go on a school-sponsored spring trip to the University of Montana in Missoula. Her high school faculty knew that they had to help their students travel that 200 miles over poor highways so the students could imagine what it would be like to enroll in classes in that relatively big school and city. My mom would have very much liked to go, but her impoverished family couldn't afford for her to go on that overnight trip, let alone enroll and attend college. I'm not sure how many times in my childhood and youth years I heard my mom tell me that story. But it definitely sunk into me. My mom's sadness at not being able to afford college was like a calling to me to fulfill her dream. It was as if, before I was ever born, my mom's dream of going to college was planted in me.

During this month of September, we're focusing our attention on the theme of "A Little Child Shall Lead Them." With that verse from Isaiah 11:6 as our basis, we've been reviewing some Bible stories about children to see where they might lead us. First we read about Samuel, a boy who heard God's voice. Then, in the story of Naaman's healing, we read about the unnamed servant girl who offered God's help. And, today, we move to Jeremiah chapter one, which tells about the calling of "a boy who could speak for God."

### **1—GOD'S CALL OF A CHILD**

So, let's talk first of all about the fact that Jeremiah was young, and what that means. It's pretty clear in this chapter that God's call of a child was not by accident. It was very much on purpose. In verses six and seven, when Jeremiah protested, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I

am only a boy,” God wouldn’t accept that excuse. As stated in verse five, God knew Jeremiah before he was even formed in the womb. Before Jeremiah was born, God had consecrated him and “appointed him a prophet to the nations.”

In case we might wonder why God chose Jeremiah, we get clarification in verses one through three. There we read that Jeremiah was the “son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.” Just south of the city of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was born into the very same priestly line that the boy Samuel had been adopted into hundreds of years before. These were generations of priestly families who passed along the stories of God’s people and apprenticed their children in this work of temple ritual and holiness practice. Of course, some children took to those inherited priestly tasks more adeptly than others, and Jeremiah obviously was one who excelled. But at the young age when he first heard God’s voice, Jeremiah wasn’t sure he was ready for additional prophetic responsibilities. After all, he was “only a boy.”

But isn’t that why a child can lead us, sometimes? Because they are still young? Most of the time God uses the wisdom and experience of adults to make the important decisions and do the essential work of the world. But sometimes, God has to raise up a child in order to get our attention. Sometimes God has to use the purity, naïveté, and impulsiveness of youth in order to get the job done. Think of the impact of the Parkland, Florida, high school students who protested gun violence after the death of 17 persons at their Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February 2018. Or consider the massive influence of Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenager who has gotten the attention of the world in regard to the climate change crisis. Even this year’s protests against police brutality have been led mostly by those who are young.

Yes, young people can get out of hand, just like older people sometimes take things to extremes. But young people also have gifts and super powers that God can use to communicate God’s word. Children and teenagers have the ability to question how things have always been done. They quickly

see and name hypocrisy. They have the ability to imagine new possibilities. They have more at stake in the future. These are important reasons for God's call of a child.

## **2—GOD'S WORDS OF RESPONSIBILITY**

In verses nine through 16, we see the content of Jeremiah's call. God may have called Jeremiah when he was young, but God didn't give him a child-sized job. According to verse 10, Jeremiah was to proclaim God's words of responsibility to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. This wasn't a Lego construction set or even a family garden. God's words of responsibility were meant to influence nations and kingdoms.

To help Jeremiah see and understand what God meant, God then showed Jeremiah "a branch of an almond tree." In the Hebrew language, the word for that almond tree branch sounded very similar to the Hebrew word for "watching." God wanted Jeremiah to know that God would be watching to see that the word of God was spoken and effective. Next, in verse 13, God showed Jeremiah "a boiling pot" that was "tilted away from the north." This was to help Jeremiah understand the disaster that would come upon Jerusalem from the north. Because of the wickedness of the people, and because they had worshiped other gods, Judah and its capital Jerusalem would be besieged.

It would have been nice if Jeremiah was just given the happy duty of building and planting. I'm sure he would have liked it better if he could have just laughed and joked and smiled. But God's judgment was coming, and God wanted Jeremiah to speak plainly. As you might guess, this message of gloom and doom wasn't well-received by his people, and even as a young boy, Jeremiah knew that God was asking him to do something very difficult. But, painful or not, it was a message that needed to be spoken. Controversial or not, it was a message that needed to be heard.

Today, in our time, we also hear God calling us to speak God's words of responsibility. Will we speak truth to power? Will we encourage those who do? Or will we shut them down and silence them by saying that they're too young to know what they're talking about? Will we allow the little child to

lead us? In regard to climate change, racial justice, COVID-19, and other issues of our day, will we cooperate with God's words of responsibility?

### **3—GOD'S CHALLENGE AND PROMISE**

God knew that it was a lot to ask, to ask a boy to speak for God. I suppose that's why, in verses 17-19, we see God's challenge and promise. After telling Jeremiah what the content of his message to others will be, God then says, "But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them." That's the challenge: Get up and get busy, and don't falter. But God's challenge wasn't unsupported. In verse 18, God also offered a promise of help: "And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you."

God wasn't exaggerating the part about people fighting against Jeremiah. In this prophetic book of 52 chapters, there are many, many times when various leaders resisted Jeremiah's speaking of God's word. They tried very hard to silence his voice of grim reality. They wanted people to think that things were going well, that there was a rosy outlook to the future. When Jeremiah persisted in proclaiming bad news, the authorities denounced him, cut up and burned his first prophetic scroll, and imprisoned him in the bottom of a dry well. Even after the Babylonians actually came and destroyed Jerusalem, hauled off many of the Jewish leaders to Babylon, and thus proved Jeremiah's gloomy and unpopular prophecies to be true, some of his fellow countrymen took Jeremiah captive and hauled him off to Egypt.

I don't envy Jeremiah's difficult calling and how it all played out. But, in the end, Jewish tradition and history deemed him to be right. His words were God's words. So, thank God that Jeremiah believed God's promise and rose to the challenge. In spite of all that happened to him and

against him, somehow God did give Jeremiah the strength to stand up and speak truth during the reign of Josiah, through King Jehoiakim and King Zedekiah, and beyond—even to us today.

Now God’s challenge and promise are ours. Will we boldly rise to the task God sets before us? Will we speak out against wrongs that we see? Will we believe that God will fortify us against criticism and opposition? Will we listen to the youth who bring a fresh perspective? Will we let them lead us? What if they’re people of color? Do we have the capacity to believe that a Latina girl or a Black boy could speak for God?

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I want to share with you the words to a new song that was written this year during the protests of May and June. The song title is “There is a Time for Silence.” That line comes from Ecclesiastes 3, which tells us that there is a season for everything: “a time to be born, and a time to die; . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up; . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” Since God’s call of Jeremiah uses similar language, it makes sense to share this song with you.

The lyrics begin,

There is a time for silence, a time to listen well,  
a time to hear the painful stories others have to tell.  
Oh, God, may we who love to talk now hear the rage and fear,  
and may we learn from neighbors who have long been silenced here.

Then, some verses later, the song continues,

And there’s a time to work now, to boldly say their names;  
to protest and to organize, to advocate for change;  
to use our voices and to stand with those who are oppressed.  
As we seek justice hand in hand, Lord, may your world be blessed.\*

May we heed God’s call in our time, as young Jeremiah did in his. May we follow the lead of a boy who could speak for God.

\*Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, c. 2020.