

Listen ... Listen Carefully ... Listen Again. *Jeremiah 18: 1-8*

Have you lived through a challenging time; a crisis; a disaster; a jarring death or loss; maybe even an extreme life-altering reality? While our present challenges with the Corona-virus may not yet qualify for any of these specific definitions, we certainly are treading upon sand freshly raked and are making some new tracks where we have not previously walked. Maybe you have experienced the terrors of death close by or another profound loss. Has it been financial, or perhaps even worse? Maybe the loss of a relationship or the destroying of a family has been your lot. Pressures like these bend and break us. They threaten, mar and blemish our person permanently.

The writer of our text today knew even greater oppression. He experienced emotional and community pain, personal fear, as well as threats on his life. His calling was to speak God's word and call people to repent who were in constant denial, rebellion. Whose spiritual practice had no depth. He was called to "*go where God would send,*" and, "*speak that which he was commanded.*"

Often he was given to speak the most challenging and unpopular of truths. Shortly before the well-known events of today's text, Jeremiah had spoken a virtual gully-washer of curses and calls to repent. He had performed acts that were signs to the community. and endured threats on his life, yes, more than one.

"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you declares the Lord." This was the promise of the God who had called him. Yes, Jeremiah was beat down by that which he was constrained to share and the reaction of those to whom he shared the message. I guess you could say, he was emotionally and spiritually "dragging tail."

Listen! God had something to show Jeremiah here personally and he has something to show each of us.

Listen carefully. The message is bigger than Jeremiah and it's bigger than us.

Listen Again. There is a God behind this message who willingly adorns himself with the dust of his people's making.

Who is this Jeremiah? Born to the family of a priest, called and sent by God to be a prophet to his people, growing up a bit more than an hour's walk north of Jerusalem. The initial word from the Lord came when he was still a youth, barely having entered manhood. Times *seemed* relatively good. Josiah, (a good king), was on the throne. The temple and worship there had been revived and there remained a faded but ingrained sense of national pride. However, apathy and shallowness contributed to false security bolstered by hollow ritual: faith in an institution and structure, which was Solomon's temple. The nation was stumbling without commitment and depth of faith in Yahweh.

The word of the Lord came to him declaring to him that

“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”

Listen! Being formed by the “Former” of all things is no small blessing.

Later in that same initial episode of the word coming to Jeremiah, his mouth is touched and it is said,

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth .” Not unlike Isaiah, the mouth is made holy, because the Word of God that will spring from those lips will be the design and content of Yahweh himself and Jeremiah will have no choice but to speak His words over nations and over kingdoms.

These words will *“pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant”*. It goes with out saying that with such a mandate Jeremiah will not be popular. The constraint God has put on him is at times overwhelming, the words are like a pounding hammer, and the response of the people is at times bemused, often fed up and always unyielding. This is the personal dis-ease and muck of experience as God’s prophet that clings to Jeremiah even as he receives the summons to attend to the potter in Jeremiah 18.

This is not a parable, and not only the words to a hymn; but rather an interlude of experience, given by God for Jeremiah to observe and examine and to visually “listen” as the sign from God continues and then to “listen (even more) carefully.”

“Arise” comes the word. (Was Jeremiah weary? It would seem so!)

“Go down to the Potters house; there I will let you hear my words.”

Observe with Jeremiah, a house surrounded by space for display of useful and beautifully intricate work shaped by the potter under shade from the heat of the sun. Close at hand, is a source of water to aid the potter in his work of forming and shaping as it pleases him.

Not to be missed is the scrap heap of residue discarded, a witness to the imperfection of the medium at use. And ... seated In the center of it all was the practical artist at his wheel of creation.

“and there he was working at his wheel and the vessel he was making was marred in his hand ...

and he reworked it as seemed good for the potter to do.”

What did Jeremiah see?

Lumps of clay? Moistened dust? The hands of an artistic ‘former’? The evidence of his ability in the backdrop, and the potential for failure on the discard pile?

Jeremiah saw a practiced creator who could take the medium of dust and water, and even when it blemished, marred and failed, DID NOT throw it on the heap of refuse but kneaded, worked, moistened and reshaped it into yet another creation as seemed BEST and as it pleased him.

Have you listened? (observed?). Now listen carefully ...

Then the word of the Lord comes. "O house of Israel"

Is this message primarily about Jeremiah? Sounds like God has a much bigger picture in mind here than just Jeremiah, (or me).

Look around this room today. Is the word of the Lord being spoken here only about Jeremiah and you?

No! it is about the set-apart, called out, holy and elect people of God. Just look at all the beautiful reshaped, reworked and intricate pieces formed and re-formed by the master artist all around you! This word of the Lord, although meant to be seen by Jeremiah and you, is truly about the beloved and called community of saints.

"Can I not do with you as the potter has done? Like the clay in the potters hand are you in my hand, declares the potter.

What is God's holy desire for his faltering marred and blemished community of Israel? He would desire to reform and reshape them "as seems best" to Him.

In the words that follow, you and I see the heart of God for the nation of Israel and for his holy church. We also see that God has an eye for the nations, because this word is not limited to Israel. Our God never lets his gaze waver from ALL the people he has formed. Our God lives and moves, not only in our church but in the world.

We see clearly in these verses that even if God would "*pluck up, break down, and destroy*" and, "*the nation to which he has spoken*", (that is responding to his word), "*would turn, he will relent.*"

The Holy desire of the potter,) is to "*build up and to plant!*"

The same holy God who called Jeremiah before he was FORMED in the womb is also the artistic FORMER who in his good and holy will would desire not to discard his people but to call them back by his word. With the kneading of his spirit and the water of life flowing freely from his own source, he would reFORM his people as it pleases him. He would reFORM you and me individually and as the whole people of God.

Have you listened? Have you listened carefully?

Listen again, just one more time.

This one who FORMED Jeremiah in chapter 1, this creative FORMER who would re-FORM the marred vessel as seems good to him is also the one who lovingly FORMED mankind out of dust and breathed life into him.

Our God perFORMS even more. We already know of the imagery of him putting his hands in the muck and dirt to create us.

However, those incarnate hands also sweat drops like blood as he wrestled in prayer with his father over how he would reFORM us.

He perFORMS by saving us from eternal return to the dust of death, taking upon himself the grime and smear of our failures, the mars and blemishes that should land us on the heap of refuse, and dispatches them by his determined crucifixion.

Ultimately his resurrection perFORMance recasts us in a new and glorified form made unto his likeness as pleases him.

Let me share a brief true story about a young man caught up in the pride and rebellion of early adulthood tearfully yet confidently coming to his father. Knowingly but with deep repentance he actually said these words,

“Dad, I’ve sinned against God and I’ve sinned against you. I don’t deserve to be your son, (and then with a knowing gleam), but I know you Dad, and I know you’ve already forgiven me.” And as quickly as the smile began it quickly faded,

“But dad, I just can’t forgive myself.”

The Father considered his distraught child. The words he shared had been passed to him by his own reFORMED father.

“My boy, I think you’re missing something. The God who made you hasn’t asked you whether you deserve to be forgiven. He lifts your head, wipes your grime onto himself and makes you into something beautiful, working to remake all the things you think you have to fix. He hasn’t asked you what you think son! He is the potter. You, ... you and I? We’re his clay.

Did you listen? Did you listen Carefully? Did you listen Again?

You were lovingly shaped for purpose.

His Holy will is that his beloved people would be called back by his word.

Our God FORMS, REFORMS and PERFORMS, smeared with the muck of our making and remaking, he grants us new and glorified Form.