

## **“God is Not Surprised”**

*Reading: Hebrews 12:18-29; Jeremiah 1:4-10*

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Jeremiah was a man on a mission from God. It's fun to speculate about how exactly he received that mission. After all, Jeremiah was a prophet – one of the big ones; we have more of his writings than any other of the biblical prophets. He spoke God's messages to God's people, and whether that means he heard an audible voice from God, or whether God somehow guided Jeremiah's thoughts in some other, quieter way, Jeremiah's words have stood the test of time. It's clear that he was on a mission from God.

And normally you would think that's a good thing. Who wouldn't love to be on a clear, indisputable mission from God? Who wouldn't love to have God come to you at a young age and tell you that you don't have to wonder what you're here for, you don't have to doubt, you don't have to struggle with what your life is for. God's just going to tell you from the start that you are going to carry God's messages to the world. You've got a mission, and it's clear, and it's certain, and God has promised to help you carry out that mission. No stumbling, no wondering, no need for finding yourself or doubting or philosophical struggling. Who wouldn't want that sort of clarity? Jeremiah was on a mission from God, a mission to speak the truth to the lies of the world around him, a mission to bear God's messages of life to people who were dying inside and outside because of those lies. Who wouldn't want that kind of commission from God? Who wouldn't want a divine mission of meaning and purpose and clarity, a mission to make a difference?

Well, Jeremiah was on just such a mission, and I'm not sure he would recommend it. Confronting lies, especially when those lies are popular and they're told by powerful people, is never going to be an easy mission. Jeremiah suffered greatly and he suffered often because of this mission, and maybe worst of all, there was no happy ending for him. It wasn't all right in the end. He watched those words from God come true, and he watched his people decimated, he watched his city demolished, and he watched the miles pass by as he was forced to leave his homeland against his will to live in exile in Egypt, where he died. Jeremiah was faithful to God and I'm sure he would urge us all to follow God's call just as faithfully, but I doubt he would recommend a mission from God as an easy path.

That mission begins at the beginning, not only at the beginning of Jeremiah's book, but also early in his life. His response to God makes it clear that he's pretty young when he hears God's call, young enough to say that he's *too* young. God's call comes in some very familiar and famous words: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.” This verse is very often misused and applied too liberally to other peoples' lives: sometimes it's used as evidence to support a pro-life position, or to reassure people that they matter to God because God was thinking about them and planning them before they were born. That's not technically the intent of what God is saying here, though. These are words to Jeremiah specifically, relating specifically to Jeremiah's call, not to everyone. Even so, there are certainly implications here for everyone.

There was a point later on in Jeremiah's life – a low point, quite literally – when Jeremiah found himself confined and shamed as a result of this call from God. He lived during perilous times, when his home nation was on the decline and the empires in the neighborhood were on the ascent,

and so there was an ongoing debate in the nation about how best to remain secure and strong while the bullies jockeyed for power. Many people said that they should become allies with one side, others said they should ally with the other side, and they should use their own ingenuity and resources to stay secure. The other prophets in town were reassuring the people that God certainly wouldn't let anything *too* bad happen to them, because this was where God's temple was, but Jeremiah had been tasked with telling them that no, it's too late for that. They had been ignoring and rejecting God for generations, and so pretending to be pious now was like confessing and apologizing after you've been found guilty and sentenced for your crime: it's too little too late, and the consequences are already coming.

Jeremiah's message of truth was not welcome in a time of crisis, when the powers-that-be were trying to hold everyone together. And so some of Jeremiah's enemies schemed and plotted and found ways to deal with him. At one point a leading priest named Pashur had Jeremiah beaten and placed in stocks for a day, confined and exposed to the ravages of the elements and the scorn of the public. A day is an awful long time when you're locked in one spot, when the sun or the rain or the wind are beating down on you, when the glares and insults of passersby are unrelenting. At other points in his life, Jeremiah faced death threats and murder plots, one of which came from his own kinsmen from his own home town. Another time, a conspiracy of officials accused him of treason before the king, and the king agreed, and Jeremiah was left to rot in the mud of an empty cistern.

In those moments, Jeremiah probably would not have recommended being on a mission from God. The clarity and purpose of having a divine commission surely seemed like a burden in those moments. And yet, just as surely, God was not surprised by those moments. I can't pretend to know what was going through Jeremiah's mind on that long day in the stocks, or in those moments of fear when he got the word about a plot to assassinate him, or in that time treading mud in the cistern. I like to think, though, that at least part of what kept Jeremiah going was remembering that call many years earlier, when God said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart." God wasn't surprised by anything that happened.

Jeremiah's first response when God first called him was, "I don't know how to speak!" But God wasn't surprised; Jeremiah would receive the words he needed from God. Jeremiah said, "I'm too young!" But God wasn't surprised by his youth; God called him anyway, and declared him a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall. Whether Jeremiah was ready for what was to come didn't matter. Whether Jeremiah was surprised at the resistance he faced didn't matter. Whether Jeremiah understood what God was doing didn't even matter. What mattered is that God wasn't surprised. Eugene Peterson points out that we get only a few scant details about Jeremiah's background: his parentage, his job, and his home town. Peterson says that we'd love to get an archaeological scoop on Jeremiah's past; we'd love to dig something out of the ground from Jeremiah's life that would shed light on his upbringing and his context. But God basically ignores all of that: what really matters is not how much we know about Jeremiah, and not how much Jeremiah knew about his call, but that God knew Jeremiah. God wasn't surprised.

Jeremiah's mission was to confront the lies of his world with the truth of God, and the lie that underlies so much of our world's thinking is that God must be surprised by what's going on. God must be surprised by the mess our world is in, or the mess my family is in. God must be surprised when people act in accordance with the character they've cultivated, and they reap the consequences of

that character. God must be surprised by tragedy. God must be surprised by my inadequacies and failures. In other words, God must not really be God. He must not be worth worshipping and trusting, and so I don't have to listen to Him, and I can throw God's messengers into a cistern rather than listen and repent.

God is not surprised by your confinement, Jeremiah. That doesn't make it easier to bear, but that does mean it's not unbearable. God does not have to cause everything that happens to be unsurprised. God doesn't have to be surprised for humans to have free will.

The world thinks God might not have a very good grip on what's going on; maybe things are just too messy or unpredictable for God. But Jeremiah speaks the truth as shown to him by God in that initial call: Jeremiah first sees an almond branch, which I'm guessing for most of us doesn't carry much meaning. Almond trees in that place and time would give one of the first signs of spring as their branches begin to blossom; they would be something you'd watch for to know that the seasons are changing, maybe like crocuses for us. What's more, there's a pun in Hebrew here that is lost in translation: "almond" and "watching" sound alike in Hebrew, so every time Jeremiah sees an almond branch from that time forward, hopefully he'll think, "God is watching; God is not surprised."

The almond branch is followed by a boiling pot tilting toward Jeremiah's country from the north. That one's a little easier to understand. Disaster is coming, and it's coming from the north, which is the direction invasions were likely to come from in those days. Eugene Peterson points out that there's more meaning, though: the boiling disaster comes out of a container, and from one direction; it's not a flood being unleashed. As Peterson says, "The first vision convinced Jeremiah that the word of God bursts with wonders and that its wonders are not illusions. The second vision convinced Jeremiah that the world is very dangerous but that the danger is not catastrophic." So when Jeremiah witnesses the outpouring of that pot, he'll think, "God saw this coming; God warned us; God is not surprised."

So what does Jeremiah's call mean for us today? What does God's commission of Jeremiah 26 centuries ago mean for us in our context, we who are not being called in the same way? Jeremiah was on a mission from God to speak the truth to his culture's lies. *You* are on a mission from God to speak the truth to our culture's lies. Maybe not in the same way as Jeremiah, but you're called. You won't live the same life Jeremiah did, and you may not suffer in the same ways he did. You may not speak truth to the same lies he did, because the world has learned some new lies in the last 2600 years, and it's put a few coats of polish on some of the old ones. But you're on a mission from God.

There's a lot of discussion in the church these days, as in all days, about just which lies should be the focus of our energy. Some people say abortion is the greatest evil that the church should be confronting, others say racism, others say climate change, and on and on. It's worth having deep discussions about the many specific lies told by our world, and it's worth thinking carefully about how the church can best confront them. But before we get to those moral issues, there are deeper lies, more subtle lies, lies about the very nature of existence that we need to confront first. There are lies about the truth of God Himself that we first need to confront, and we need to tell our world about God first. Let them know who God is first, let them know that God is good, and that God is not surprised by what goes on; God is not out of control or sleeping or arbitrary or forgetful or spiteful or absent or any other lie that gets told about what God is like.

So what do we do? First, we are comforted. God is not surprised by what happens, either in our lives as individuals or the life of our nation or in the life of the entire world. That doesn't mean that emergencies aren't serious or that urgent needs shouldn't be taken care of urgently, but it does mean that the world going haywire does not worry God. Things are not getting out of God's hands. God's faithfulness is not in question. God's ancient plan to give us hope and redemption and to restore His kingdom is not in jeopardy. We can be comforted, because God is not surprised.

Second, we are confident, but not complacent. God is not surprised, so we can know that when He calls us to do something or say something or live a certain way, God is not surprised by the results or the roadblocks in getting there. God is not surprised to find you locked up in stocks, or to find you treading mud at the bottom of a cistern. If you've been faithful to God's call as best as you can, you're not there because you've screwed up. You can be confident in God's call. But at the same time, don't be complacent. Don't get comfy in the cistern and just give up. Don't think that because God is not surprised, there's nothing for us to do but sit back and watch the fireworks. God's call is for us to join in His work.

And so we go forward boldly, confidently, in the comfort of God's faithfulness and power, to cry out against the lie of our world that God is absent, God is silent, or that God is weak. We cry out that God is not surprised, and so we can faithfully hold fast to His call to love our neighbors and our enemies, to bring justice to the oppressed, to seek the lost, to set the prisoners free, and to offer hope to the hopeless.



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