

"Jeremiah was a bullfrog, was a good friend of mine." And everybody knows what he sang: "Joy to the world, all the boys and girls, joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea, joy to you and me."

Another Jeremiah was a prophet. Ironically, nobody would probably say that "he was a good friend of mine." And his message is anything but "Joy to the world," at least not in the superficial sense.

Jeremiah is the longest prophetic book in the Bible. Jerimiah is also the second longest book in the Bible overall. Yet, he's often not on our radar screens.

Isaiah is popular. Isaiah is chock full of warm fuzzy familiar passages. In the old days we used to read Isaiah four times as much as Jeremiah. For that reason, the group that puts together the list of Sunday readings has tried to double the number of times Jeremiah would be read during our three-year cycle of readings. That means, beginning today, and continuing for the next two-and-a-half months, we'll hear each week from Jeremiah.

Why should you care? Why should you listen to Jeremiah?

Well, if everything's is going great in your life, maybe you shouldn't. If everything is peachy keen and hunky dory, then Jeremiah will just depress you. As I said, his message is not, "Joy to the world."

But if you're having difficulties, if you're under stress, if everything is NOT going your way, if you're troubled by the situation in the world, then maybe Jeremiah has a message for you.

And if you are under the false illusion that things are great, but they're really not, if you're fooling yourself, then Jeremiah definitely has a message for you.

We'll be walking with Jeremiah as our first reading for the next 9 weeks. So this morning, I want to say a few things in general about Jeremiah. Then I want talk about a few specific teachings from the portion of the first chapter that we read as today's Old Testament lesson.

But first, a brief history lesson: Josiah was the holiest king in the history of Israel. Hands down. David was more beloved. Solomon built the Temple. But Josiah was a holy man. He led his country in a religious revival. They got back to the basics. They stopped worshipping other gods and they turned again to the God of Israel. Josiah's reign is one of the high points in Jewish history. The only problem is, it ended badly.

The problem was, the Jewish nation of Judah was small. And they were sandwiched in between 3 very large and powerful neighbors, three powerful empires: Assyria and Babylon and Egypt. And when the big boys would fight, Judah would often get caught in the middle. That's what happened in 609 B.C. Judah got caught in the middle of a fight between Egypt and Assyria. The wonderful King Josiah was killed in battle. Judah became an Egyptian territory.

And all of the religious reforms of Josiah fell by the wayside. Many Jews returned to worshipping false gods.

A few years later, the Babylonians attacked, and Judah became a Babylonian province. A few years after that, the Jews revolted. They got a really screwy idea into their heads. Since God's temple was in Jerusalem, they thought that made them invulnerable. They thought that God would automatically protect them from anything no matter how badly they behaved.

However, the problem was, they were presuming too much. They weren't following God. They were worshipping other gods. But they thought God would protect them anyway. So when the Babylonians came in, they hit Jerusalem hard. They carried a number of the leaders off into exile, and they put a puppet king on the throne.

12 years later, this puppet king Zedekiah got uppity. He led his people in another revolt. This time Babylon came in and wiped them out. In the year 587, Jerusalem was sacked. The Temple was demolished. Almost every member of the upper and middle classes of Jews were carried off into exile. The Babylonians made King Zedekiah watch as they executed all of his sons, ending his royal line. That was the last thing he ever saw. They immediately put his eyes out, and carried him off to die, blind and in chains in Babylon.

Okay, so what's the point? Where am I going with all this? The point is, there was enormous amount of change for the Jewish people within a few short decades. They got out from under Assyrian control. They thought they had it made. Then they had a great religious revival. Then they were defeated by Egypt. Then they were defeated 3 times by Babylon. And the third time was the worst.

In fact, in Jewish history, there is a great debate about which was THE darkest time for the Jews. There are only 2 possible answers. The darkest time was either the Nazi Holocaust in the 1940's. Or it was the Destruction of the Temple and the Exile of 587 BC. 587 was a very bad year.

And during this time, from the glory days of King Josiah through the destruction of the Temple, during these decades, there is one prophet who ministered that entire time. This prophet had a 45-year career from 627 until 582. He watched his country go from exhilarating highs to terrible lows. And his name, you guessed it, was Jeremiah.

Jeremiah holds the record for longevity. There were other prophets running around during his early ministry: Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. There were other prophets who overlapped him at the end: Ezekiel, and Obadiah. But only Jeremiah was at work during from the glory days of Josiah down to the horrible days of the destruction of Jerusalem, 45 years from beginning to end.

And during all this time, Jeremiah sought to be faithful to God. And Jeremiah did not preach a popular message.

When the people kept falling away from God, Jeremiah tried to turn them around.

When the kings and people started trusting in shifting political alliances, Jeremiah tried to call them to trust in the Living God.

When the people were full of pride, and wanted to fight foreign oppressors, Jeremiah told them to be careful, since God just might be using those foreign countries to discipline the Jewish people and teach them humility. But no one listened to Jeremiah.

From a human standpoint, Jeremiah was a total failure. Nobody liked his message. Nobody heeded his message. He was not able to avert his nation's headlong fall towards destruction. He didn't have any impact on the people. He experienced personal pain and sorrow. His life and his liberty were constantly at risk. People made fun of him. Because he proclaimed doom and gloom, the people nicknamed him Mr. 'Terror-on-Every-Side.' They're treated him like Chicken Little. "Hey, Jeremiah. Hey Mr. Terror-on-Every-Side, is the sky is falling?" Well, sure enough, in 587, the sky fell. Jeremiah was right. And Jerusalem was wiped out.

Through it all, Jeremiah did what God asked him to do. He proclaimed the message God asked him to proclaim. And for us, he left a written record. This record is a very human record. At some points, Jeremiah is fed up with God and he says so. And yet, he also leaves behind a marvelous witness to God's greatness. He gives marvelous testimony to God's power in the world. And, perhaps most importantly, in the midst of tremendous darkness, Jeremiah speaks of hope. Jeremiah speaks of a deeper kind of joy that can come after facing very difficult times. Over the next 9 weeks, we'll hear some of those passages.

But the question arises, "How could Jeremiah do this? How did he stay on course for 45 years preaching an unpopular message? How did he keep from becoming demoralized? The answer comes from our OT lesson today. I want to look at it very briefly. Because it contains great hope for us. If it worked for Jeremiah in the midst of all of the horrible events of his life and his world, then it can work for us too. Today we hear the beginning of Jeremiah. We hear about his call. In his words: "Now the word of the LORD came to me."¹

That's so important. Jeremiah knew that he was proclaiming God's message, not his own. By sticking to God's message, he could be faithful, even though it caused him trouble with those around him.

That's important for us to remember. We probably won't be appointed as God's prophets. But if we stick to what God wants of us, we can endure the troubles that arise around us.

God says to Jeremiah, "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."² These are wonderfully comforting words. God saying 'Before your parents ever conceived you, I had plans for you.'

¹ Jer 1:4

² Jer 1:5

Can you hear God saying that to you? 'You are special. I have great plans for you. I have a purpose for your life.' In times of stress and uncertainty, God offers us that kind of reassurance.

Then Jeremiah says, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."³ Jeremiah is offering excuses. I'm only a boy. Which meant maybe 15 or 18, or 21. 'I'm inexperienced. I don't know how to be a prophet.' We offer excuses to God too. 'I'm too young. I'm too old. I've don't have enough money. I've got so much money that I have to spend all my time taking care of it. I'm not smart enough. I'm too smart to do anything as foolish as trusting you.'

Yet, hear God's reply:

"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."⁴ In other words, God is saying, 'If I'm calling you to do something, I'll equip you to do it.'

And then God makes a marvelous promise:

"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."⁵

Notice, God doesn't say, 'Hey, it'll be a piece of cake.' God never says, 'Follow me and all your problems will be solved.' That's certainly not what happened with Jeremiah. But notice the wonderful promise. "I am with you to deliver you." You may have hardship in this life. You may struggle. You will eventually die. But in the midst of all that, God says, 'I am with you. And I am able to save you. Even death cannot ultimately claim you.'

That's how Jeremiah made it through 45 years of a very rough ministry. That's how Jeremiah held on to hope in the midst of one of the darkest periods of Jewish history. He knew that God had called him. He knew that God had great plans for him if he would be obedient. He knew that God would give him the strength and power to do whatever was required of him. And, most importantly, he knew that God was present with him.

Those promises are for us, too. At the end of the Gospel According to St. Matthew, Jesus says, "I am with you always." Life may not be easy. But God is always good. The future may be hazy. But God has a plan for you. Life may bring hardship. But God promises to be with you.

If it worked for Jeremiah, it can work for you too.

³ Jer 1:6

⁴ Jer 1:7

⁵ Jer 1:8