

It's Not About You

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[0 : 00] In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Fear is a powerful emotion.

It makes us lash out in anger and frustration. It makes us domineer and control. It makes us cower in the corner.

Whatever it does to any one of us, fear in each case stems from a sense of isolation. The feeling that we're alone, and by ourselves we cannot handle whatever it is that we face.

Fear has to do with isolation. Jeremiah is dominated by fear.

Oh, Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth. It is the fear. It's fear that lies at the heart of this.

[1 : 15] After all, it is to this deep-seated emotion that God subsequently responds. Do not be afraid of them. Verse 8.

It is the fear that Moses had. Oh, my Lord, I'm not eloquent, either in the past or since you've spoken to your servant, but I'm slow of speech and of tongue.

Like Moses, Jeremiah is experiencing debilitating fear. He'd rather cower in the corner than follow the God who has a hold on his life.

This passage has a message for those of us who identify with Jeremiah, especially, therefore, for you, Arnold, as you are being ordained today.

The message is this. It is not about you. Now, that may seem like a strange thing to say at an ordination service.

[2 : 29] Isn't it all about you? Aren't you the one being ordained? Aren't you the one who sets out to follow God's call? And aren't you the one who's being charged with a task?

All that is true. And yet, this is not about you. And of course, in some sense, it was about Jeremiah. Certainly, his enemies did their best to make clear it was about him. He is the one false prophets mock and assault.

He is the one who gets beaten and put in the stocks. He is the one who gets left for dead in a cistern.

He is the one that his hometown neighbors are trying to kill. Few biblical books are as personal and as emotionally wrenching as Jeremiah.

[3 : 35] All of his life, he struggles with the isolation he suffers as a result of God's call. Time and again, he cries out to God in anguish and fear.

Cursed be the day I was born. The day when my mother bore me. Let it not be blessed. Jeremiah is an isolated, persecuted figure.

And he is open with us and with God about his emotional turmoil and the fear that he experiences as a result of God's call.

It seems indeed, it is all about him. Let's have a closer look at the opening passage that is meant to serve as the lens through which to read the rest of the book.

In some sense, again, it is about Jeremiah. He is the one being called. He is the one whose mouth gets touched by God's hand. He is the one receiving this astonishing charge to pluck up and break down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.

[5 : 02] But there is something in this chapter that is much more central than Jeremiah, his task or his fears.

That something is the word of God. This passage isn't about Jeremiah or his ordination primarily. It is about the Lord and his word. The word of the Lord came to me saying, verse 4. Whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Verse 8. Behold, I have put my words into your mouth. Verse 9. Throughout this passage, and really also in the verses both before and after, it's about the Lord's word.

God's speech is central. Fear has to do with isolation. And believe me, deacons and priests, especially they know about isolation.

[6 : 23] Especially they too, therefore, know about fear. So how is God's word supposed to cancel out Jeremiah's isolation and fear?

First, God points us back to the past. Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

Verse 5. When was this before? Before you were born, I consecrated you.

I appointed you a prophet to the nations. When was this before? Surely it wasn't just a few years ago when the evil kings of Judah, Manasseh and Ammon, ruled and destroyed true worship of God in the land.

Surely it wasn't a hundred years ago when the Assyrians destroyed and exiled the northern tribes out east. And surely it wasn't even when evil first reared its ugly head with the fall of Adam and Eve in paradise.

[7 : 43] This before is a before that grounds temporal small W words in the eternal capital W word.

This before is a before time began. It is the before of God's eternal providence. God's words, the words that he speaks in time, always go back to his ultimate word.

The word that contains eternally the loving, salvific plan of God in Christ for the salvation of man.

Those who know that God calls them, that God appoints them, that God ordains them, have always had their fears beaten back by this knowledge.

They've always been encouraged knowing that God's words, small W, that these words in time go back to his eternal word, capital W, in eternity.

[9 : 04] That is already how St. Paul links his appointment in time to his appointment in eternity.

Galatians 1.15 When he who set me apart before I was born.

Same language. The apostle here is talking about the very same before that we read about in Jeremiah.

It is the before of God's eternal word. It is the before of God's eternal providence in the love of his son.

Now that should take care of Jeremiah's fears. Right from the start. After all, God's plan with Jeremiah is grounded in his very own thought, capital T.

In God's own faithful character. That should take care of his fears. But it doesn't at all.

[10 : 26] Notice when Jeremiah mentions this fear. It's not before, but it's after God says, You've always already been in my heart.

It is after God says this that Jeremiah responds, He's afraid. Oh Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak. I'm only a youth. That says a lot about you and me.

Doesn't it? We know that God's temporal small W words go back to his eternal capital W word.

And yet, we are afraid. Yet, we draw back. God's reaction?

He reaches out even more deeply to cancel out our isolation and fear. Let's look at our passage.

Let's look at our passage. For God not just looks back to the past, before I formed you in the womb.

[11 : 34] He also comes to us in the present. He brings his eternal word down to us in the form of temporal small W words.

Do not say, Do not say, I'm only a youth. For to all whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Verse 7. It doesn't matter that Jeremiah is only a youth and doesn't yet know how to speak. This is not about him.

Whatever I command you, you shall speak. All Jeremiah needs to do is repeat the words that God gives him.

It's really quite simple. Simple. Yes. But profound. For what we read in verse 9 is the moment of ordination itself.

[12 : 47] The Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. This is when it happens.

God puts out his hand from heaven to earth. This is the Michelangelo moment. Where God's hand touches Adam's.

As the sign of the Holy Spirit breathing life into this body made from dust of earth. The Lord put out his hand.

But note, he doesn't touch Jeremiah's hand. As in the Michelangelo painting. He touches his mouth.

After all, this is about speech. About words. From the touch of God's hand. Comes the speech. [13:51] Of Jeremiah's mouth. The two senses come together at this profound moment. As heaven touches earth. As God reaches out to man.

Your ordination, Arnold. Isn't about God wishing you well as he sends you off on Mission Impossible. No, this is about God ordaining you.

That is to say, as we saw in the form earlier already this evening. It is about the spirit of God indwelling you.

Giving you life. Sustaining you. Even in the deepest fears that you may have to go through. Behold. Behold. Behold. I have put my words in your mouth. Says the Lord. You and I.

[14:59] We respond. We respond with an ancient hymn. Veni creator spiritus. Come creator spirit.

Oh finger of the hand divine. The sevenfold gifts of grace are thine. True promise of the father thou. Who does the tongue with power.

Endow. Spirit. The spirit. The finger of God's hand. The spirit is the one who does the writing and the speaking.

Only that finger. Gives the words. Where to speak. Only that finger. Truly drives.

Our fears. Away. God not only points back to the past. Not only comes to us in the present.

[16:01] But he also saves us. In the future. None of what I've said so far. Makes the job. Any easier. Any daunting.

Any less daunting. The reason is simple. The job. Is still the job. And Jeremiah's job. Is not an easy one.

I'm sure it hasn't escaped you. That of the six words. That give the job description. Verse 10. Four. Are words of judgment. And only two. Words of mercy. I have set you this day. Over nations and kingdoms. To pluck up.

And break down. To destroy. To overthrow. Four words. Judgment. And then the Lord adds. To build.

[16:59] To plant. Two words. Of mercy. By far. The larger portion. Of Jeremiah's words.

Is words of judgment. God's people. God's people. Are going to be. Exiled. To Babylon. That is his message. Nearly all the way through. And yet.

There are those chapters. In the middle. Chapters 30 through 33. The book of comfort. Those are the chapters.

Where Jeremiah is allowed. To build and plant. Those are the chapters. Where he's allowed. To promise a new covenant. Where he may offer. Messianic hope. And peace.

For the future. Jeremiah's task. Was a challenging one. It brought him. Physical. Emotional.

[17:59] Mental. Spiritual. Hardship. Terror. On every side. He was nicknamed. That's certainly. How he experienced it.

But in the midst. Of this terror. Despite the isolation. Jeremiah must have had. These words of God. Ringing his ears.

Do not be. Afraid of them. For I am with you. To deliver you. To deliver you. Declares the Lord.

I am with you. To deliver you. That is God's promise. For Jeremiah. That is God's promise. Also for you.

Arnold. And indeed. It is God's promise. To all of us. I am with you. Emmanuel. God with us.

[18:57] I am with you. To save you. Our fears. Are real. No sense denying them.

But remember. This passage. Is not. About us. This ordination. Arnold. Is not.

About you. It is about God. His word. It is about the capital. W word. That eternally.

Surrounds. And upholds you. It is about the small. Capital. Sorry. It is about the small. W words. That you.

Speak. When the very. Finger of God. Touches. Your mouth. And. Most importantly. It is.

[19:57] About the word. Become flesh. The one. Who in Christ. Always. Is with you. Amen.

Amen.