

Louise Johnson
Northeast Iowa Synod Assembly
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Jeremiah 1:4-10

4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

*5 “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.”*

*6 Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I
am only a boy.” 7 But the LORD said to me,*

*“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.*

*8 Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.”*

*9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and
the LORD said to me,*

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.

*10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”*

Good Morning! My name is Louise Johnson. I am called to serve as President of Wartburg Theological Seminary. And before we turn our attention to God’s word, I want to take a moment to thank Bishop Ullestad for this invitation to be with you and I want to thank you for your strong partnership in the ministry of forming

pastors and other leaders for the ministry of the gospel. We have students from this synod in every program we offer at Wartburg and we benefit from strong financial and scholarship support from the Northeast Iowa Synod. It makes a difference. Together we are forming leaders for the church and through them, changing the world. We are deeply grateful. We could not do what we do without you. And I want to take a moment to invite you to consider if the Lord is calling you to serve the church or if you know someone who is.

In these days of synod assembly, we are studying what it is to be a reformer. The texts we hear this morning are from our own Evangelical Book of Worship. And in one of them, we hear the story of Jeremiah, who God called to be a prophet to the nations.

We hear the story from Jeremiah's perspective. "The word of the Lord came to me, saying..." he begins. And though the word of the Lord makes it clear that Jeremiah was, in fact, *created* for this calling, Jeremiah refuses it. He knows in his heart of hearts that he is inadequate to the task. So he declines, offering his youth and his inability to speak as evidence of God's folly in choosing him. "Ah,

Lord God!” he begins, “Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

And, of course, in some sense he’s right. Think of a boy – even an older one – speaking to a kingdom, to those in power, telling them what God wants them to do. Even if what he says is wise, he is easily dismissed. At best, he is likely to be patronized. “Well, isn’t he smart for his age!” At worst, he may draw laughter or derision. Either way, his youth makes him less credible in a culture that values the wisdom of experience.

And, of course, we know in our culture that it is not only the voices of the young who are easily dismissed. There are others who struggle to get a hearing, too, whose voices are not as valued by the culture around us. Think of someone whose accent is thick. Maybe it is someone very old. Or a person of color. Perhaps it is someone who is obviously poor or homeless. Someone in a wheelchair. A woman. Whatever the reason, some of us understand that our gender, education, race or station in life affect our ability to get a hearing.

Or maybe Jeremiah isn't thinking about the cultural context at all. Maybe he is just painfully aware of his own inadequacy - a gangly teenager, painfully self-conscious, who spends far more time looking at shoes than people because the interaction is just too intense. Maybe he struggles to string five words together in a world that seems filled with gregarious, verbal people. Maybe he longs to speak with confidence and clarity, but the harder he tries, the worse it gets.

Or maybe Jeremiah is just plain afraid, casting about for any excuse not to have to step into the calling God has for him. He is the son of a priestly family, after all. So he would know that prophets rarely have it easy. That they were often called to speak very difficult words to people who didn't want to hear them. Maybe it was his fear of the calling that prompted him to offer God a polite "No, thank you."

Whatever the case, God calls and it quickly connects Jeremiah with his own inadequacy. He is painfully aware of his own shortcomings, the ways in which he is ill-prepared, doesn't measure up, won't be effective. And so he politely declines.

About three years ago, I was standing in my living room in Philadelphia. I had interviewed for my call just hours earlier. My phone rang. It was the chair of the Presidential search committee. He said he was calling me to tell me that the committee had finished their work and that they had unanimously voted to recommend me to the board as the next president of Wartburg Seminary. This is what I said. Uh. Uh. Uh...

I had applied. I had interviewed. But the truth of the matter was I never imagined in a million years that I would be called. Confronted with the reality of the work, all I could see were the ways in which I didn't measure up, the reasons I should run for my life and never look back, the ways in which others would struggle to accept a younger, female president without a PhD. I knew exactly why I was not their candidate and the thought of serving made my blood run cold. I was paralyzed with fear. "I shouldn't have even interviewed," I thought to myself. "They clearly don't know me. I can't do it. This is a mistake."

Ever been there? Ever been called to do something you knew you have no business even attempting? Ever gotten into a job and

run smack into the end of your capacity – in week two? Ever doubted your ability to be a good parent or spouse?

The truth is, that more often than not, the call of God brings us up close and personal with all our shortcomings, all the reasons why we cannot do the job. It plunges us headlong into an experience of inadequacy and each of us must reckon with the reality that we are not able. Some of you in this room are there right now. God is calling you and you are recounting all the reasons why you are a poor choice. And you're probably right. Or maybe, despite all your fears, you said yes to a call a while ago. But things are not going the way you hoped. Maybe your church is struggling financially. Maybe there are divisions. Maybe people just don't want to come anymore. You have tried everything, all your best moves, all the latest ideas, and still nothing seems to be working. You are face to face with the terrible reality of your own incompetence. And you are wondering if you got it wrong, if God really called you at all. And if so, then what on earth was God thinking!

Listen again to how the call begins:

*“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.”*

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,” God says. What does it mean that God knew you? You were on God’s mind, long before you ever came to be. God had a dream for you. God created you with purpose. God consecrated and appointed you, knowing all along who you would be, what you would make of yourself, the ways in which you would fail. God knew ALL of that. All of it. And God formed you for a purpose and called you to that purpose whether or not you think you have the goods to make it happen.

Jeremiah’s call was to be a prophet to the nations. Melanchthon was called to be a reformer. Some of you may be a called to serve as part of the leadership of your church or synod. For others of you, God may be calling you to be a pastor or deacon. Whatever the case, each of us is called to be a disciple, a reformer of the church for a new era. But how? With such a long list of

shortcomings, how is it that a boy like Jeremiah or ordinary people like you and I come to be prophets and reformers, leaders, pastors, and disciples?

Sisters and brothers, God knows our shortcomings. God knew them long before we were even formed in the womb. God knew all the ways we would fail to measure up, all the really good reasons why we should say no. But the truth is that none of that matters. When God calls us to do something, God sends us where we need to go. God gives us the words we need. God delivers us from our fears and enemies. God goes with us. When God calls us to do something, God steps in. It isn't about you or me or our shortcomings. Because if it is, we are doomed. Even for those of you who are incredibly talented, eventually you will come to the end of your capacities. It is about God, who is able. God who is capable. God who is powerful. God who accomplishes so much more than we can ask or imagine. God who is our refuge and strength. It is about God.