

*Does the Church Speak for God Anymore? – Part One*  
*Jeremiah 1:4-10*  
*August 26, 2007*

I want to thank you all for the time off afforded to the Noels as we gathered with my family in coastal Maine last week. It was a great reunion with my mom and dad, brother and sister-in-law. I understand that you heard powerful witnesses from both Dr. Karen Dorris and Rev. Shelli Williams. Of course we are welcoming the Kings into our church family this week. You will have a chance to meet them after the service. Trish, Bill, Kersten, Kelsey and Thomas – welcome! As you get to know Trish you will learn what a gifted minister she already is. Every time I am around her she says something really profound. I am going to steal just a bit of her thunder, if she doesn't mind. As she was writing her introductory newsletter article about herself, she said something that really got my attention. She said she is really more comfortable with disorganized religion than organized religion. Trish, you're going to like it here! Then she said this: "while the Church doesn't always get it "right," it's still a place of *relentless, ridiculous hope.*" A place of *relentless, ridiculous hope* – I love that...for that is what holds us together, does it not?

In that spirit we are going to look at the witness of one, living about 2600 years ago, who reflected on that same relentless, ridiculous hope that God's people would finally get it right. I guess God is still waiting. Over the next six weeks we are going to look at this amazingly complex and interesting character of this prophet named Jeremiah and the book that is both his story and Israel's story. I have provocatively entitled this series *Does the Church Speak for God Anymore?*

Now we might come to conclude, based on recent history, that the answer is a resounding “no!” After all, look at much of the silence of the church in the wars of the twentieth century. Look at the lack of leadership with regard to racism and sexism. More often than not the institutional church (that’s organized religion, Trish) has lagged behind society on many justice issues. As we learn also from Jeremiah’s story religious/civil leadership were equally impotent in not heeding God’s call for reconciliation through acts of obedience to the call for faithfulness and for social justice.

So is the answer to this question a simple “no?” Since we are a people of relentless and ridiculous hope, and since we show up each Sunday hoping for a good word, let’s give it a try, shall we? Ultimately we claim as people of this book, in the many ways that we read it, that our hope is grounded in scripture and in a communal experience of God’s spirit. Since scripture has authority for us, let’s begin our journey through the story of the prophet Jeremiah with some foundational questions. Who was Jeremiah? What was going on in the history of God’s people? What did he really write in this long, complex book? And what is prophecy anyway? Jeremiah was one of three, Major Prophets of the Hebrew Bible whose prophetic activities spanned forty-six years. He is author to at least two books – Jeremiah and Lamentations – and some scholars believe he is the author of the Books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. The personality of Jeremiah is one of the most complex and complicated in the entire Bible. He is part prophet, poet, advisor and critic of the kings of Judah in tumultuous times of reform, political collapse and deportation. He witnesses the torture, assassination and sacking of the most powerful kings of his times. He not only speaks as historian and poet, but also demonstrates in performance art, walking about in the streets with a yoke about his neck and engaging in

other dramatic ways to attract attention. He is taunted, thrown in jail, and at one point thrown in a pit to die.

Jeremiah is also a player in a geopolitical drama involving Israel, Assyria, Egypt and Babylon – the most powerful empires of the world. He witnesses the high points of Josiah's consolidated Temple and the low points of bitter defeat at the hands of the Babylonians as he sees the Jerusalem Temple in rubble. All of this is carefully chronicled in the history of the Kings, alongside the prophetic utterances and emotional ramblings of the prophet. In the book of Jeremiah we have a rich tapestry of poetry and prose. Most believe that Jeremiah's voice comes through most plainly in the poetical oracles of God's judgment upon Judah. The divine call of our lectionary text is glorious poetry that recalls God's special claim upon Jeremiah. God speaks to Jeremiah in a kind of dialog in which he was known by God before his conception; that he was consecrated by God before his birth; that he was appointed to be a prophet to the nations. Just for special effect God's words are placed inside his mouth. And in verse eleven Jeremiah has a wonderful pun in Hebrew where the first blooms on the almond tree are compared to God's constant watch as he says, "Jeremiah, I'll be watching you just to make sure you are faithful to my word!" Nothing like a little pressure, huh? Now is this an actual voice? Is this like the voice of God speaking to Oral Roberts, "raise the necessary funding for the new worship center by tomorrow or you will die?" No. Jeremiah is a mystical poet. And what is poetry but, as Wordsworth describes it, that "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility." It is that aging prophet, reflecting on many years of ministry since his call as a teenager, recalling God's lifetime claim on his life.

So what is prophecy? As you know there are two forms of prophet: the one who tells the future, and the one who poignantly explains the “signs of the times” as a way of critiquing and calling the people back to God. Both are done with sensitivity toward the Holy Spirit, and those who truly hear the Spirit speak truth that is often hard to hear. The **first kind of prophet** has always been rare; only about 10 percent of prophecy in the OT is directed toward the future. And today I think this kind of prophecy is more rare. I don’t think that it’s impossible because I believe that God still speaks today, and he could very easily tell someone something like this. However, the two parts of this future directed prophecy is: that it calls people to worship God (it is not for the prophets own gain) and it’s meant not as an individual gift (such as God tells me when to play the lottery or when to avoid getting on the plane) so much as a corporate Gift, in other words it has social implications and glorifies God. The **second kind of prophet** is much more common and I do think there are people who speak with the words and heart of God in a way that critiques the powers of our world. In fact, I think Mennonites, Quakers and Catholics have nurtured this gift among their people more consistently than a number of other traditions because of their insistence on listening to the living Spirit of God. This kind of prophecy is in line with the Jeremiah’s and Isaiah’s of to OT and of course Jesus in the NT because it is very unpopular, often rejected, and is often only accepted after it’s too late or almost too late to turn around. One example of this is the prophetic witness of Quakers and their involvement in the Underground Railroad, something we’d all hail as a revolutionary obedience to what the Holy Spirit called all the church to do. Their involvement in the railroad was not only illegal but highly rejected by people inside and outside the Friends movement. It took a really long time for the rest of the church, and

just as long for the rest of the country, to accept their anti-slavery position as truth. But now, looking back, we Christians know that God is against domination and oppression and that the Spirit always calls us to help those who are in these situations. Those who first listened to the Spirit and who responded obediently were prophets leading the people of God to respond.

It is this second kind of prophecy to which I believe the people of Bering are called. I would like to propose a definition of prophecy: *the language of social conscience that moves us toward God*. For me Jeremiah's call text has three major claims for a people listening for God's prophetic word. First, as we see with Jeremiah, *God speaks to passionate people of conscience and rarely to institutions*. In fact it is the institutions, which kills the prophets. Institutions tend to be motivated by maintaining the power and place of the institution. Jeremiah got in the face of the kings of Judah and challenged them to confront idolatry and turn them toward a social mission to the poor and disadvantaged. Institutions rarely respond to the radical call for change. Instead God raises up change agents. Let's look at two you know from the twentieth century – Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. These modern-day prophets used civil disobedience, more specifically, non-violent resistance to change the worlds in which they lived.

Both King and Gandhi exemplify the second claim of our text: *Words are the artillery of the prophet and they have the power to destroy or to build up*. Jeremiah reflects in tranquility that God placed the words in his mouth and gave those words power – to destroy and overthrow and to build and to plant. Gandhi and King, through acts of resistant non-violence overthrew systems of racism and classism. And their

weapons were nothing more than words and symbolic, courageous actions. Here the haunting words of Dr. King when warning the church: *“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”* Or his words to the historians: *“History's biggest tragedy is not the violent acts of bad people, but the appalling silence of good people.”* With a strategic parry of the pen King attacked the war of his day (Vietnam) in this way: *“I am convinced that it is one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of the world. It has played havoc with our domestic destinies. This day we are spending five hundred thousand dollars to kill every Vietcong soldier. Every time we kill one we spend about five hundred thousand dollars while we spend only fifty-three dollars a year for every person characterized as poverty-stricken in the so-called poverty program, which is not even a good skirmish against poverty. Not only that, it has put us in a position of appearing to the world as an arrogant nation. And here we are ten thousand miles away from home fighting for the so-called freedom of the Vietnamese people when we have not even put our own house in order. And we force young black men and young white men to fight and kill in brutal solidarity. Yet when they come back home that can't hardly live on the same block together. The judgment of God is upon us today,”* King concludes.

Gandhi, though less poetic than King, could disarm with humor. Once he replied to a reporter who asked him what he thought of western civilization: “I think it would be a very good idea.” He could encapsulate truth in just a few words: *“Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need but not everyone's greed.”* Finally Gandhi could

motivate the best in the human spirit to rise in all of us. He once said, *There are times when you have to obey a call which is the highest of all, i.e., the voice of conscience even though such obedience may cost many a bitter tear, and even more, separation from friends, from family, from the state to which you may belong, from all that you have held as dear as life itself. For this obedience is the law of our being.*

Even though prophecy is one of the highest callings of ministry, my third and final claim is *that prophets don't live to see their work come to its ultimate fruition.* Moses died on Mount Nebo just outside the Promised Land. Gandhi and King were assassinated before seeing their dreams realized. Jeremiah was unsuccessful in turning the hearts of the powerful. But that doesn't undercut its ultimate nobility. Does the church speak for God anymore? It's all in the way that you understand the church – the institution – rarely. But once in a while God lifts up, not with a megaphone, but in a gentle, loving voice one that can change the world. So take heart. Relentlessly hope in a ridiculous way that God is reconciling the whole world to God. Take encouragement in these words from Gandhi, who encountered the most powerful foes in his own struggles: *first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win!*