



Fire Shut Up in My Bones

TEXT
Jeremiah 20:7–13

September 8, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I started working pretty early in my life. Introduced to work with the allowance stage; you know, I got a quarter if I made my bed, did some dishes and hung the towel on the rack in the bathroom. Shortly after that, I got a job cutting lawns in the neighborhood. This was before such things required a trailer full of equipment — just a push mower and a can of gas. I’d get \$5 for a “largish” yard. It was OK, but summers in Alabama were hot, and I had a real gift of finding yellow jacket nests buried in the ground. So, I quit that.

Then I got a job in the mall selling Florsheim shoes. I was the worst salesman in the history of capitalism. When I started working there, I had to buy a pair of shoes from them because they said I couldn’t sell Florsheims while I was wearing my PF Flyers. It took me three months to make enough commission to pay for those shoes. I could tell this was not going to work out, so I quickly left that and became a fry cook at Western Sizzlin. Working at that steakhouse was a great incentive to become a vegetarian. It was hot and greasy, and I learned that folks can be quite particular about their onion rings, even at Western Sizzlin. I hated it.

You may have had jobs in your life that you hated. I was still a student and my parents were still paying for my life, so I quit all those jobs. I realized I didn’t want a job; I wanted a calling. I wanted to do something that fed me. Dan Schuurman, in his book *Vocation*, says that these days, “calling” often refers to what one loves to do, whether for pay or not. If a person loves her or his job, it is said that this job is a calling. It refers to a person’s passion.”¹

That’s what I was missing. I needed something that fed my passion.

Jeremiah had a calling. He was a prophet, and all the prophets were called to be prophets. Being a prophet is not a volunteer job; no, God has to call you. The book of Jeremiah actually opens with God saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you to be a prophet.” Jeremiah was born to be a prophet. He was born for this. And he hated it.

The truth is, most prophets would have preferred to be anything else if the Spirit of God had given them any other option — because prophets were never popular. Being a prophet, by definition, means you see things

differently than those around you, and you say so. And none of us want to hear a word that challenges our view of life.

Jeremiah was particularly eloquent in naming this frustration. He says, “I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.” A few verses later, Jeremiah says if he was born to be a prophet, it would have been better not to be born.

Given how hard this was, you would think Jeremiah would just quit. *Let someone else do the work. I’ve had enough, I’m out of here.* And he probably would if this was about passion. But he can’t. He can’t because calling from God is not always about passion; but it is always about responsibility — particularly the responsibility to use the gifts that God gives you.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist in Vienna and was rounded up by the Nazis chanting blood and soil as they marched him to the camps in 1942. Frankl learned in the camps that life is not first about “my passion.” He said he learned to ask not “what do I want from life, but what does life require of me.” Frankl’s own sense was that life had given him an assignment and placed a moral task before him.² The prophets understood this.

In John Irving's book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen is the son of reclusive parents who run a granite business. Owen is a strange young man, small in stature, strong in conviction, odd in personality, and he had a grating voice. A wrecked voice is how his best friend, John, describes it. John's grandmother suggests that Owen visit a voice coach to help him. John tells his grandmother: "Owen doesn't think it's right to try to change his voice."

"Why on earth doesn't he think it's *right*?" she asked.

"He thinks his voice is for a purpose; that there's a *reason* for his voice being like that," I said.

"*What* reason?" my grandmother asked.

"Owen thinks his voice comes from God," I said quietly.

"Merciful Heavens!" Lydia said.

"I think his voice comes from the Devil," Germaine said.

"Nonsense!" my grandmother said. "Nonsense to it coming from God — *or* from the Devil! It comes from *granite*, that's what it comes from. He breathed in all that *dirt* when he was a baby! It made his voice queer and it stunted his growth!"³

Owen understood that God had gifted him and that the only faithful option was to be a steward of this holy gift. His voice, even if wrecked in nature, his voice was a gift from God. That's how the prophets understood their lives, and it really is how we all should understand our lives.

For Jeremiah, and for all of the prophets, their calling was tied to their gift. What made the prophet a prophet was the abil-

ity to see. It sounds odd, but the truth is, they could see what was really going on. Sometimes we can look right at life and we think we see, but somehow we miss what is really going on.

I have told you before about my brother Gene, born with special needs and special gifts. I have told you how his biggest dream in the world is to drive a car. He's 57 years old now, and that dream is still in there.

Of course, the guy is never going to drive. Not possible. He silently watched his younger siblings get their licenses and drive. And then he watched my kids get their licenses and drive. I think he knows he will never drive, but he still talks about it.

It was 20 years ago, I guess. A group of us were playing golf, and my brother Gene came along. He couldn't use his irons, but when we got to the green, he would drop a ball and putt. He was riding in the cart with my friend Eddie. Eddie and Gene were buddies.

When we finished the front nine, we headed to the back nine, and we had to pass the clubhouse. As we did, I noticed that everyone we passed had stopped what they were doing, and they were watching us. They just kept watching, some looking quite concerned. I didn't understand. I turned around to look behind me, and that's when I saw it. Eddie knew how much Gene wanted to drive a car, so Eddie thought it would be a good idea to let my brother drive the golf cart. They had swapped places, and Gene was driving the golf cart. It was clear from the look on Eddie's

face that he was having second thoughts about the idea as Gene swerved and lunged on and off the cart path. I realized now why everyone was watching, to make sure this apparently drunk guy didn't run them over. But the look on my brother's face was delight.

I'm no prophet, but I know those guys at the clubhouse thought they understood what they saw ... but I doubt they did. What was really happening is we were getting a glimpse of God's promised day — that day when everything that has gone wrong is made right.

We live in confusing times. And so often we look, but don't see. It's hard to know just how God sees us these days. When that's the case, God sent prophets.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, the prophets have the gift to "know what they see rather than simply see what they already know."⁴ That was their gift; that, and words. For once they saw what was real, they had to say so. The only tool God gave the prophets was words. And those words had to come out.

Jeremiah says, "If I say I will not mention God, or speak any more in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."

He has no choice. He knows that the life of a prophet will leave him a laughingstock in the eyes of many, but he can do no other. This word must come out.

When our daughter Sarah was young, one of her many gifts

was talking. Oh my, that child could squeeze more words into breakfast than Webster could fit on 250 pages.

One time when my ears were exhausted, I said, “Sarah sweetheart, why don’t you and I play a game?”

“Yes, let’s play a game, Daddy.”

“Good,” I said. “Let’s play this game; let’s see who cannot talk for a whole minute.”

She looked at me and said, “Oh, Daddy, now is not a good time.” She wasn’t a prophet, but she knows what it’s like to have a word that just has to come out. The word of God lived in the prophets like a fire shut up in their bones.

Why does it have to come out? This is the most important part as we look toward this series. Why were the prophets driven to tell us what they see? If I understand the texts, it is because the prophets had the same love for God’s people as God does.

You might think of the prophets as angry guys, wagging fingers, taking delight in telling you everything that we have done wrong. Well, they had their moments. But for the most part, what drove the prophets and would not let the word stay within them, was love.

You see, God could see that the people God loves were missing the point of their lives. They were shirking their responsibilities; they were not using their gifts. So God called prophets to speak the truth — because God refuses to give up on us.

So, for the next several weeks, I want us to listen to

these hard words of love. I say this because we live in confusing times. We live in times that, when it comes to the big things that impact the lives of people in the world, nobody is doing anything about them.

We live in times when some basic things are being ignored, like civilized people practicing basic civility and leaders feeling some sense of obligation to tell the truth; and for strangers to be at least respected, if not loved as Jesus taught, rather than finding their humiliation or desperation a reason for celebration.

We are living in times when our systems need attention. Our politic needs redemption, and our economy needs to include more folk, and citizenship needs to be a role held in honor rather than simply a platform for cynicism.

We live in confusing times, and it’s hard to see the truth. So, maybe if we sit with these ancient voices, we might see something we haven’t seen before. And maybe it will help.

For I am confident of this: God won’t give up on us. That’s why she sent the prophets to begin with: God refuses to give up. So maybe if we listen to them again, the prophets can open our eyes to the truth of our own times. We will see.

¹Douglass Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (2004), p. 3

²David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015), pp. 21–25

³John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, pp. 194–195

⁴Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962), p. 24

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.