

“Child’s Play”

Big Buts in the Bible – part #5

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Today is the last message in our series, “Big Buts in the Bible.” So far we have covered the stories of Abraham, Moses, Gideon, and Peter, and today we come finally to the prophet Jeremiah. I have been encouraged by your response to these messages. Literally just this week, someone said to me, “Pastor, I’m trying something new, because you said, ‘Stop making excuses; we’re never too old to serve God.’” Hallelujah! Someone’s listening.

As I’ve said before, I often feel like I’m preaching to myself. I am a habitual procrastinator. I have made terrible excuses in my life, instead of simply facing the truth and doing what needed to be done. Fortunately, the grace of God is available to all of us, even me, so we don’t have to make excuses and say things like, “I’m too scared, too uncomfortable, too unpopular, too messed up, too old, or too young!” Instead we can say the words of Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Last week, we learned how Abraham complained, “I’m too old.” Today the complaint we read is, “I’m too young.” Not coincidentally, today is Graduation Sunday. I hope that our graduates and young people would never use Jeremiah’s excuse when God called him to be a prophet. Jeremiah says in 1:6: “Alas, Sovereign Lord,...I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

Raise your hand if someone ever told you, “You’re too young.” For some of us, it has been a while, yet all of us have experienced this barrier. I will confess, sometimes that complaint has been a chip on my shoulder. I became a youth pastor when I was 27 years old, in a church with an average age of 65. That

church loved me, but every time one of my ideas was shot down by the leadership, I admit, I thought to myself, “Well, it’s just because I’m so much younger than them, that’s why they reject my ideas.” That complaint really made me an arrogant person. I needed to let it go.

Whether we say we’re too old or too young, we need to drop our excuses and listen to what God is telling us today.

What is Jeremiah really saying when he complains to God? “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” Are there really any young people who don’t know how to talk? I’ve never met one! Give me a teen with a cell phone, and I’ll show you a young person who talks, and texts, and posts, and Snapchats, and Facetimes, and Tweets, and Instagrams, and Whatsapps, and more! There are so many ways we communicate, I’ve lost count.

No, Jeremiah is not saying that he cannot speak, what he is really saying is, “Will anyone listen to me? Will they believe me, respond to me, change because of anything I say? More than likely, they just blow me off, laugh at me and mock me!” It turns out, Jeremiah’s fears are pretty much spot-on with the fears our young people have today. In fact, we all have them. There is a natural fear of public speaking. But it goes deeper than that. This is an issue of respect. Will others respect me when I tell them the truth? That’s what we really mean when we say, “But I’m too young.”

People may or may not listen to you when you tell the truth, depending on how you say it. If you post in all caps with fifty exclamation points, then no, no one will listen to you or respect you. Truth is never loud or rude. But maybe, if you speak with sincerity and humility and in the interest of others, you will find a receptive audience.

Jeremiah's audience was not going to receive God's message well. His message was a call to stop worshipping false gods, to stop making foreign alliances, to stop mistreating the poor, and to start worshipping the one true God. This was not a campaign speech; it was a direct call for repentance. Hence, Jeremiah looked at God and said, "I'm too young. There is no way they will listen."

Here's God's response: *But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you."* (verse 7) God's answer does not really address Jeremiah's fears that no one will listen or respect him. God simply expects Jeremiah to obey. Jeremiah's youth is no excuse. Graduates, embrace this truth: You are not too young to speak the truth. You are not too young listen to and obey God.

We know that Jeremiah did go and preach the truth to his people. Let's just say, he had mixed results. Jeremiah was chronically depressed and went around weeping most of the time. He was kidnapped, thrown into an empty well, beaten and put into stocks, and called a liar. Jeremiah is credited for writing the saddest book in the Bible, Lamentations. It is not surprising that his book of prophecy is long and not nearly as entertaining as Harry Potter or Twilight. Jeremiah was writing to tell his people why their entire country was conquered and exiled. I'm guessing "weeping prophet" was not one of your top ten career choices.

But Jeremiah is still a valuable role model for us today. God did not promise to give Jeremiah an easy life. But listen to what God did promise Jeremiah. *"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.* (verse 8) Note that God does not say, "I will prevent them from

harming you.” God does not promise to remove hardships from our lives. God promises to be there with us. There is a huge difference between those two.

What would you do if you knew that God was always with you? What would you be able to say if you knew that God was sending you? Would you do what Jeremiah did? Would you speak the truth, even if it was unpopular?

Jeremiah did. This is Jeremiah’s job, in his own words: *Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”* Jeremiah went to the people wherever God sent him, and he said the words that God literally put in his mouth with his own hand.

Jeremiah stuck to his morals. God had called him – it was unescapable. And in the face of temptation and the whole country telling him to “stick it in your ear,” Jeremiah told them the truth. This is rule number one from Jeremiah – never be afraid to tell the truth. The consequences of lying or saying nothing at all are much worse.

Because of the hard truths Jeremiah proclaimed, he had a troubled life. In fact, in chapter 20, Jeremiah has this conversation with God, after all the hardships of prophesying. (Jeremiah 20:7-8)

You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived;
you overpowered me and prevailed.

I am ridiculed all day long;
everyone mocks me.

Whenever I speak, I cry out
proclaiming violence and destruction.

So the word of the LORD has brought me
insult and reproach all day long.

Jeremiah actually complained to God. He pointed his finger in God’s chest and shouted, “Why did you call me? Why do I face such persecution?” Jeremiah was so upset, he actually called God a liar. “You deceived me, God!” Jeremiah felt duped. He said yes to God, and it is almost as if he regrets it. Mike Yaconelli used to paraphrase Jeremiah’s words: “Prophecy this, God: I ain’t prophesying no more.”

The trouble is, Jeremiah knows he can’t stop. Once you know the truth of God, it is impossible to deny it. Jeremiah goes on to say, *“But if I say, ‘I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”* (verse 9)

Jeremiah is in this for the long haul. He is not seeking immediate gratification or results. He simply believes in God’s protection. Truth is like a fire in your bones. You have to let it out. It is painful to withhold it. Truth burns, especially when keeping it hidden hurts someone else. It eats you up inside. God’s truth, the good news, is meant to be proclaimed. Christ died for us sinners! God expects us to love others. We have to tell someone. If we keep it inside, then it is not good news.

Put your hand in the air if you have ever heard God speak. All of our hands should go up – we just read the Bible, and that is the Word of God!

No matter who you are or what age you are, God calls you to speak the truth. Graduates, you are being set apart this week. Consecrated for a specific purpose. You are going to do something special. Something good. No matter what you do, speak God’s truth. Don’t worry if they say you have a big mouth. You just might be a prophet. God has big plans for you! (Jeremiah 29:11)

A prophet speaks as God’s messenger. And messenger must be reliable. Have you ever had to report what someone else said? Been a witness in court? Are you reliable? When you speak, do you tell the truth? Always? Or are you like me? Sometimes I exaggerate. Or tell a half truth. We all try to paint the picture the way you want to see it. But telling God’s truth means having integrity, always saying what you mean, and saying it in love. Saying it to the proper person at the proper time. Whether it’s good news or bad. No wonder Jeremiah had such a hard time. We all do, when we struggle with the truth.

But we can do it. Just as God promised to be with Jeremiah, God promises to be there for us. God promises to deliver us and rescue us. Not to help us avoid trouble, but to be with us in trouble, especially when the trouble comes because we honored God and spoke the truth.

God’s protection does not mean we will not suffer harm. It means God will be with us and use our discomfort for the good of those who love him, if we are willing.

God calls each and every one of us. God initiates the conversation. God answers the excuses. God gives the words the prophets need to say. God reaches out to us. God initiates the contact. God touches our hearts, before we are even aware. We call this prevenient grace – grace that literally comes before we know God is reaching out to us.

If God is willing to take that much risk with us, how then shall we respond? What will we do with our words? Will we speak the truth? Sticks and stones may break my bones, but prophets’ words even stronger. Will you build up with your words? Or will you tear down? Will you speak the truth in love?

My friends, preach the truth. Always. Learn from Jeremiah. You are not too young, or too old, or too unqualified. God has called you. Give your words an outlet. Find someone to share your good news with. When you have the truth in you, do not hold it in. Proclaim it. Preach the truth. Always. Do not hold it in. I promise you, when you do, God will be your defender and your rescuer.