

Reason to Fear

By
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From the Pulpit of
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Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day.” ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to

shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

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.”

One of my favorite questions is, “How do you best receive disconfirming information?” My friend Edd asked it and he attributed it to a former colleague, a woman named Jill Janov who worked as an organizational dynamics consultant for massive companies and governments. It was the question she would ask the CEO or whoever was leading the organization she was consulting for on the first day of a new consultation. Embedded in the question is the firm belief that whatever she learns working with the organization, that CEO will have some changes to make –not everything will come back a confirmation of their current course of action – and so since there will be disconfirming information, how do you, CEO, best receive disconfirming information? What a great question.

The prophetic tradition in holy scripture is in many ways an ongoing, centuries long engagement with the question, “How do the people of God best receive disconfirming information?” Oracles of hope, oracles of doom and gloom? Do we prefer urban prophets or rural ones? Maybe we prefer what are called sign-acts – these uniquely prophetic actions in which a Biblical prophet basically puts on a performance art piece: flouting the laws of the sabbath to heal, naming their children something strange like “Not my people,” or lying down on one side for a symbolically long amount of time and then lying down on the other side. What about the social location of the prophet – a shepherd, a dresser of sycamore trees whatever that is, or a prophet whose family business has for generations been religious life?

We have just heard the call of the prophet Jeremiah. He comes from a long line of priests and his prophetic ministry lasted about five decades, encompassing pretty much all of the above. His prophetic project was long enough and at a pivotal enough time that he was able to see the fulfillment of his prophecies in real time – he saw King Josiah’s last-ditch efforts to

return the people to God through a series of sweeping but failed reforms. He witnessed the sack of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the execution of many of its priests, and the mass deportation of his neighbors. He was left behind and forced to live out his final days as a refugee in Egypt, where his final prophetic act as an old man was castigating his fellow refugees for abandoning their allegiance to the God of Israel by seeking shelter with a foreign power.

But that's for later: for this morning, we hear God speaking to a youth. A young boy. Calling him to a life of prophetic ministry and telling him, "Do not be afraid." Which is ridiculous. There will be those who support him and care about him but Jeremiah, in the years following his calling, will be cancelled by false prophets and the target of many assassination attempts. He will literally be thrown into a pit to die. He has reason to fear.

Jeremiah's first prophetic oracle is an admonition to remember their youth, to remember the good old days of their covenant with the God of Israel. He reminds them that their covenant with God is conditional and that they have broken it by worshiping other gods and through strategic military alliances with neighboring empires. He tells them that this abandonment of the covenant of their collective youth means the God of Israel can break covenant with them, too. A few chapters later, Jeremiah will prophetically convict the people even more, pointing out to them that they are now conducting human sacrifices: child sacrifices to other gods. Importantly, the people of Israel were unique in the ancient near east for not worshiping a god who demanded human sacrifice. This was core to their identity. And they had abandoned it. They had sacrificed children on the altar of other gods.

What a way to provide disconfirming information! A child, begging for an end to child sacrifice. A youth, beseeching the people to remember the

covenant of their youth. The weeping prophet: weeping for the people to return to their God.

The prophetic tradition isn't just "How do the people of God best receive disconfirming information?" It's also, "To what extent will the people of God consider disconfirming information at all?" For as we have just heard, Jerusalem was sacked, the people executed, deported, or left behind to live as refugees.

Engagement with the prophetic literature of holy scripture is to consider anew the prophetic tradition that remains alive in our own time and place. We can picture the prophets of our own era: Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Martin and Malcolm, Ida B. Wells all come to mind. But the prophet Jeremiah, called in his youth, scared of the adults to whom he would prophesy has me thinking of a different class of prophets, and, uncomfortably, our responses to the disconfirming information they have provided.

On the eve of a new school year, I am thinking of the Parkland kids, those survivors of the 2018 shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida who collectively organized a school walkout and founded a group advocating gun laws that would keep children safe in school. They led the March for Our Lives in Washington DC with sister marches all over the country – more than a million people protesting and calling for action on guns. Of course, there has been no meaningful legislative action on guns but school security is now a multi-billion dollar industry. Architects command big commissions for designing schools with curved hallways to reduce a gunman's line of sight, instant lockdown doors, impact-resistant glass, intruder prevention systems. A new class of consultants have emerged, offering emergency simulations, tabletop exercises, and trainings on the three pillars of school safety: run, hide,

fight. Men at trade shows wearing lanyards peddle “ballistic whiteboards.” New companies disrupt the industry with bullet proof backpacks.

Young people in schools sacrificed on the twin altars of gun culture and the market above all else. This week, during that harrowing 60 minutes where we thought we were next, I received a text from a friend in Garrett Hill: “It is hard to explain to the kids why we aren’t going to the playground today.”

In 2018, the same year as that shooting at a school named for a noted conservationist, a 15-year-old girl in Sweden named Greta Thunberg began a weekly school strike to challenge her political leaders to take immediate action on climate change. She called on them to adhere to the principles of the 2016 Paris Agreement, the goal of which is to prevent the global surface temperature of the earth from rising 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Adhering to this commitment, of course, is the bare minimum to prevent climate catastrophe, something our young people know well because they’re the ones who will live with the consequences: mass migration, powerful storms, disappearing places like my beloved nieces’ ancestral homeland, the Marshall Islands, lying low in the Pacific Ocean. The United States pulled out of the Paris Agreement in 2020, re-entered it in 2021, and then withdrew again in 2025. Greta Thunberg continues her activism but, just like the Parkland kids, she has been sacrificed on the altar of our culture wars, mercilessly vilified by those who do not share her commitments.

In 2012, a 15-year-old girl named Malala Yousafzai survived an assassination attempt by the Pakistani Taliban in retaliation for her activism in support of girls’ education. Her activism began when she was just 11 years old, blogging anonymously for the BBC about the experience of girls as the Taliban took over her home region of Swat. Malala won the

Nobel Peace Prize at 17, got a degree from Oxford, and continues to advocate for women and girls around the world. As we know, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021 and the Pakistani Taliban are among the fastest-growing terrorist organizations in the world, operating with impunity in the cross-border region with Afghanistan.

Several weeks ago, a viral video from Gaza depicted Abdullah Abu Zerka, a 4-and-a-half-year-old boy, simply saying, “I am hungry.” He died on Tuesday morning at a hospital in Turkey. His six-month-old sister Habiba is still fighting for her life.

It is devastating to think that these unimaginable child sacrifices may have been made on the altar of American foreign policy. Still the prophet asks, “How do the people of God best receive disconfirming information?”

OK. What do we do? The prophet calls us to repent and return to the Lord. How shall we do that? Of course, there remains important advocacy work to do: We can lobby for gun laws and implore our elected leaders to act in Gaza. We can discern prayerfully about narrowing the aperture of our own investment portfolios. We can reconsider our own carbon footprint and support communities affected by climate change. That’s all good but here’s what I’m really suggesting.

Let’s be the kind of adults that would not make Jeremiah afraid. Let’s be the kind of adults who put ourselves in a position to hear prophetic words from young people and not respond in a way that makes them afraid. What am I talking about?

A few weeks ago, I was at the Montreat Youth Conference with 15 of our middle- and high-schoolers. Michael Giampetroni, trustee of this church and high school Sunday school teacher, came along as an adult chaperone and I’m sharing this story with his permission.

The Jeremiah Project is an opportunity at the Montreat Youth Conference for young people to participate in worship leadership. Go on stage, lead a prayer, read some scripture, help serve communion – that kind of thing. Conference attendees are invited to attend a training session on the first day right after lunch. Michael thought this sounded fun so off he went to the Jeremiah Project, arriving with a big group of young people, and taking his seat in the circle. The adult leaders welcomed everyone and asked everyone to go around the circle and introduce themselves: what's your name, where are you from, what grade are you in, and what's your favorite animal. And so around the circle they went: I'm Michael, from Bryn Mawr, PA, I'm not really in a grade, and my favorite animal is the sea otter.

After everyone in the circle went, the leader of the group thanked everyone and gently reiterated that the Jeremiah Project was an opportunity for young people to lead worship, at which point Michael, in a circle full of youth, turned to a leader nearby who said, before Michael could form the question, "Yeah it's just for the kids."

I love what this says about Michael. A complete willingness to be de-centered as the adult. Total comfort as the only adult in the circle. It shows a willingness to listen, engage, and participate completely not as an expert but as any other person in the program.

The impulse to show up and fully participate in the Jeremiah Project is exactly what I'm calling on us as adults to do, and I'm not talking about the public speaking program. I'm talking about listening, engaging, participating – learning to be comfortable in the experience of being de-centered as an adult.

Here are a few practical ideas:

Join us at the blessing of the backpacks after worship and pray for students as they embark on a new school year. More so, bring your own backpack and let yourself be prayed for.

Consider becoming a prayer partner and commit to praying for a small group of our children and youth by name throughout the entire year. Pastor Rachel and I meet monthly with that group to share joys, concerns, and be centered in the experience of these young people.

Consider serving as a confirmation mentor and walk with an 8th grader through the process of discerning membership in the church. Meet monthly with a young person and field questions and support them. But more importantly, take the opportunity to consider anew your own life of faith and discern what membership in the church looks like for you.

Starting this September, consider going to the family fellowship in the ed building immediately after worship. Get to know the church's young families. Run around with kids while eating Oreos.

This all sounds modest and maybe it is. But I believe it is possible to cultivate practices that make us the kind of adults that Jeremiah wouldn't be afraid of when he received his prophetic call. The kind of adults that were there all along to make his ministry over five decades possible and plausible.

At the end of the Montreat Youth Conference, Michael received a handwritten note of affirmation from a student in his small group thanking him for all he had brought to the small group. And in closing she added, "I'm sorry you were not allowed to participate in Jeremiah Project." But of course, the note was proof that he had. And so can we.

Amen.