

Jeremiah was a bullfrog,
was a good friend of mine,
I never understood a single word he said...
(You had a hard time not singing that last line, I know).

Had Three Dog Night
been around in the 7th and 6th centuries, BCE,
the people of Israel would have agreed
to never understanding what Jeremiah,
the prophet, said to them.



And truthfully
it wasn't that he was hard to understand,
it was mostly that he was hard to believe.
Jeremiah wore a heavy prophetic mantle
and is often referred to as the weeping prophet—
his word from the Lord
was not pleasant,
comforting
or reassuring.

It was often gloomy,
disturbing and challenging.
No preacher ever aspires to be like Jeremiah.
His place in Israel's history
is during the darkest and most turbulent times.

While Jeremiah's career
starts with the kingship still intact,
the nation's downfall is on the horizon.
He delivers oracles of destruction,

and he is consistent to the point of annoyance
in laying out Israel's sins
and God's working against the people and nation.
He is Debbie Downer of the prophetic office.

Remember how several years ago,
we had a congregational retreat on verbs?
We took the idea from one of my professors,
Anna Carter Florence,
who claimed that if we took a biblical text
and looked at the nouns;
like, Anathoth, Hilkiyah, priests
—looking too much or too deeply into
people, places, and things,
that it was easy to get bogged down,
to feel as though the text was too ancient,
too removed—do you remember?

Carter Florence said that if instead
we looked at verbs,
we have a better chance
of entering the world of text
and letting the text permeate our own (world).

In his call story
we hear that Jeremiah
is handed some pretty strong verbs by God,
'you will be a prophet to the nations and kingdoms,
to pluck up and pull down,
to destroy and overthrow,
to build and to plant.'

These six verbs describe Jeremiah's prophetic ministry.

Which of those verbs,
might be the word of the Lord for us,
right now, today?¹

¹ Richard W Nysse, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2960

Pluck up?
Pull down?

Destroy?
Overthrow?
Build?
Plant?

We'd lean toward those positive ones,
wouldn't we?

We'd rather hear a sermon
on building and planting
more than the others.

But I'll go ahead and tell you,
there are only a few chapters
(though important)
where Jeremiah actually gets to bring
God's promise of building and planting.

Instead, we are left to chew on
the much tougher verbs—
verbs of an over done steak
or think about that scene from Christmas vacation
when they are all eating
that overcooked turkey at the table:



chewing and choking it down
...those are the verbs we get.

Pluck up,
pull down,
destroy,
overthrow.

Welcome to feast of prophetic literature.

But there is good news.
I promise there is.



Jeremiah had a difficult prophetic career.
However, given his doom and gloom message,
he stands in the unique position
to teach Israel how to continue their faith in God
when God seemed to be
behind their destruction.

It was not uncommon for the ancients
to desert their god when things went badly.
Politics and religion
were one in the same.
So, if a nation of people were defeated,
it must have meant their god
had been defeated as well.
The Assyrian god must have been stronger.
The Babylonian god must have been stronger.

But Jeremiah became the voice
encouraging and enabling his people
“to see their own tragedy
[as] the working out of the purpose of God.”²

This meant that a new faith could arise
out of the ashes of what had been
to see that God was still at work
with and for the people
—Jeremiah was the prophet
that brought Israel into new understanding.

² Robert Davidson, Jeremiah: Vol. I, The Daily Bible Study (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1983) pg.10

For the new to arise the old has to depart.

Most often this means death.

You've probably heard the theory of Max Planck,
a German physicist who said
that in order for a major paradigm shift to take place,
the opponents to the new ideas

can't be convinced of its truth;

instead, the opponents actually have to die
in order for the new ideas,

for the paradigm shift to take hold.³

So not only does this mean the death of actual people

but also, a death of the old ways, old thinking,

old way of giving meaning and interpreting the world.

For a new faith to take hold,
requires a radical transformation.

A new word from the Lord

to turn the people's hearts and minds

to see God in a much broader and deeper way.

The work of transformation is never easy.

It is never simple.

It is never quick.

It would.

But it isn't.

But every one of us here knows

that any improvement,

any betterment,

any progress requires the dramatic;

and for God's people at this time,

it required plucking up,

pulling down,

overthrowing,

destroying what once was

or might have been

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4079-a-new-scientific-truth-does-not-triumph-by-convincing-its>

in order to bring something new.
That's where Jeremiah is.

In the midst of a people
who have gone after other gods,
forgotten the covenant of Yahweh,
they haven't looked after the poor,
the orphaned, the widowed.

Since the people did not listen,
since this generation did not turn from their sin,
—the prophetic implication is
that their actions led to their own demise.
God, through the person of Jeremiah
decides and declares,
two strong verbs,
enough is enough.

Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah,
of the priests of Anathoth,
in the land of Benjamin.

Lots of nouns.

But let's explore these nouns for a moment:
these nouns mean Jeremiah knew
the religious and political life
of the people well.

He saw firsthand the corruption
and waywardness of Israel.

He also lived in Anathoth,
only 2-3 miles from Jerusalem
—which became the city
that did not fall.

Recent history held the memory
of the Assyrian empire
marching from the east and sacking
the northern kingdom of Israel.

10 of the 12 tribes of Israel
were lost and dispersed forever.
But the southern kingdom of Judah

did not fall
and a doctrine of Jerusalem's indestructability
arose among the people.



When Jeremiah repeatedly refutes this idea
during a politically charged time,
his public sermon in chapter 7
arouses significant and dangerous opposition.
Including the real possibility
of being put to death.⁴
One commentary calls this, *The Unpopular Sermon*.

This was not
a run of the mill sermon—
it got under the peoples' skin,
it made everyone uncomfortable.
“It was sharp enough to offend,
to divide the community
and make the people think.”⁵

Did you catch
some of the verbs in his sermon?
Amend (your ways).
Act justly (with one another).
Do not oppress (the poor, the orphan, the widow).
Do not shed innocent blood.
Do not go after other gods.
These are the verbs
of every biblical sermon,
aren't they?

In more ways than one,

⁴ Sandra L. Gravett, *Sandie Daily Bible Blog* <https://sandiesbibleblog.wordpress.com/2015/09/04/day-243-the-temple-of-the-lord/>

⁵ Robert Davidson, *Jeremiah: Vol. I, The Daily Bible Study* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1983) pg.71

Jeremiah's sermon has a lot in common
with another well-known Jewish preacher.

A preacher that proclaimed
that now is the time for the people
to repent or you could say amend their ways.
Now was the time to act justly and rightly
or you could say
to treat your neighbor
exactly how you'd like to be treated.

A preacher that modeled
that the poor and oppressed,
the forgotten and outcasted
are to be cared for and welcomed in.
A preacher that resisted violence
and instead shed his own innocent blood.

A preacher who kept saying,
I am bringing the word of God,
I am the word of the Lord
I am the one coming into the world
to radically shift how you encounter God.

Jeremiah was a prophet
...never understood a single word he said...
but then again,
Jesus' words were not understood well either.

That inability to heed the word
is a reoccurring theme
in the history of God's people.
But there is also the reoccurring theme
of voices that brave the difficult
and daunting task
of standing in the Word of God
even when that word is unpleasant,
uncomfortable,

and downright condemning.

Stan Mast at Calvin Seminary says,

“To go against the grain
as Jeremiah and Jesus did,
we will need a deep conviction
that our ministry is of God.

[So, here we go back to Jeremiah’s call
and pay attention
to the 1st person singular nouns
and the verbs that follow].

*‘I formed you,
I set you apart,
I appointed you,
I send you,
I command you,
I am with you and will rescue you,
I have put my words,
I appoint you over nations.’*

From beginning to catastrophic end,
the ministry of Jeremiah and Jesus
was from God.
That’s an important word
when our best and faithful work
seems to bear no fruit.
Success in worldly terms
is not necessarily what God calls us to.”⁶

Verbs and nouns, promises and assurances.
Disasters, transformations
and unpopular sermons.
As God’s people today,
there is no doubt that there are places
where Jeremiah’s verbs
are the word of the Lord
for us right now.

⁶ Stan Mast <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-4c-2/>

