

"Speaking Out"
(Jeremiah 1:4-10)
January 30, 2022

Jeremiah was a major prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah. He was from a priestly family. We are not sure when he started his ministry. However, he was active close to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Israel, the divided kingdom at the north, was defeated and destroyed by Assyria more than a century ago. However, the people in the south didn't seem to remember and learn from that experience as they were criticized for practicing immorality, worshiping idols everywhere, and even introducing human offerings in their rituals. (Jer 7: 9, 30-31)

We might ask, "How could that happen? Didn't they have a temple of their own, with Yahweh the God of their ancestors to worship?" Well, they had that. However, a god without an image was too radical, too remote for even the Israelites themselves. It seemed that what their neighbors were doing was more tangible and convincing. Adopting some common religious practices was not only a solution for them to get along with their neighbors, but also avoided a lot of troubles caused by the influential and powerful people who worshiped other gods. Compliance with the cultural and religious practices relating to visible gods and goddesses also gave them a sense of security helped to feel that the weather and the harvest were under control. What about the known financial, political, and military powers Judah depended upon, i.e., Egypt in the southwest and Babylon in the northeast? Judah was walking on thin ice all the time since it could not please one without upsetting the other.

Do you feel Canadians are facing similar difficulties? Canada has a deep root in its culture in European traditions. But, over time, elements of the cultures from

the immigrant populations have made the Canadian culture a mosaic. Different provinces and territories in the country have been dealing with issues differently depending on the issues' impacts. As a result, most of us have learned slowly to keep our basic needs and emotions with ourselves, our religiosity within our specific religious groups, and our opinions within our interest groups or political alliances.

It's a good thing that we don't have to bother others with our basic needs and emotions, but it would minimize us to realize that we need each other. Unfortunately, the systems that we have created and the professionals we trusted for the sustenance of our societies are not always functioning as we wish. During the pandemic, we have seen doctors who don't act professionally based on science, politicians who set policies based solely on the opinions of their constituents, frontline workers who got burned out and lost their patience, parents who face daily conflicts at home between generations, and more. People of different skin colors, genders, age groups, and health conditions are looking everywhere for help. Movies, Tv-shows, short video clips, internet chat rooms, physical training, meditation exercises, and others have become the norms for all to maintain a so-called "normal" life.

Do we feel our lives are manageable for the past two years then? In the beginning, maybe. Some enjoy using their cell phones or tablets for a long time without being criticized, working without the need to go back to the office, receiving government benefits without the need to work. However, some suffer from loneliness and feel forced to do things against their will, like wearing masks and getting vaccinated, delaying their medical appointments and treatments. Some worry about the new normality in the future, economic inflation, the rising

cost of living, and increased international political and military tensions. A lot of people felt lost. And a question emerges more potent and more robust: Is there anything in this world that can help one confirm one's identity, see one's value, and calm one's restless soul?

Amid the turmoil with Judah, Jeremiah received God's call. Through this call, God confirmed him a new identity, the mouthpiece of God; God assured him that age would not diminish his value, and God calmed him down as he didn't need to prepare any powerful speech by himself. Instead, he only needed to speak spontaneously, in phase with what was happening in his surroundings.

Do we feel comfortable if God appoints us over nations and kingdoms like Jeremiah? We better be! Since God has chosen us already to announce the coming of God's reign, a commonwealth, not of domination, but peace, justice, and reconciliation. We must face the same threat that silenced Jesus. And we shall sing continuously of Jesus raised from the dead, since death does not have the last word. (Refer to "A Song of Faith" – A statement of faith of the United Church of Canada, 2006)

When Jeremiah received God's call, he conceived it as something he could refuse. His reasons were simple: his age and ability to articulate a convincing speech. And our reasons are probably the same: our age and ability. When God put out his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth, God said, "Today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." So Jeremiah's ministry was grounded in God's initiative, not his own.

The Christian Church is, by nature, the called-out ones, a group of people called by God from a larger group of people. We, as Christians, are the first people

who must be aware that the reason for our existence is for others, no longer for ourselves. We might follow the path of the priests to look for ways to make their institution, succession of personnel, and rituals sustainable. But we are invited to follow the footsteps of the prophets, who are more flexible with the duration of their ministry, with what they do and say since they are dealing mainly with the present. To live in the present is our choice!

"To pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Didn't his ministry look scary? Yes, it did, and it still does. Jeremiah's ministry focused more on judgment for Israel than salvation. And he saw the foreign elements more as God's instruments of judgment. That was not a straightforward task. People could accuse him of treason, committing a crime against his own country. However, it might be necessary unless our institution's mission and vision are heading in the right direction. Minor and major adjustments are necessary before a huge institution changes course.

The verbs we have here could be grouped into three pairs and provided us with three perspectives to look at the changes: 1) The first pair is "pluck up, and plant," like the operation in agriculture. The action of plucking up refers to an event that happened in specific sites, and "planting" could happen anywhere. Jeremiah saw his generation and their deportation, and what we see is the empty pews. Most of our next generation no longer stay. Do we have a plan at all to help them to grow somewhere else, places where they can establish their own identities, uphold their values, and have no fear when unexpected things come up? They might not be religious like us, but they are spiritual. Sort of endorsement from us would be encouraging. If the metaphor in agriculture is unclear, "pull-down and build" would be another pair with a metaphor in the area of

construction. It helps us visualize how to help the persons we care for restructure their lives. "Destroy, overthrow" is the most brutal pair among the three as it's in military terms.

Jeremiah was unwilling to take up the responsibility God gave him, and we are almost the same since we have hesitation to carry on what our faith ancestors were doing. Jeremiah saw himself being young and inexperienced as barriers to the mission, and we worry because we think we might be too old and overwhelmed with experiences.

God said to Jeremiah, "You shall speak whatever I command you." He would not be equipped with a sword that a king or warrior usually used, but God promised him the word of God. He would call people to trust and practice God's ways, even when those ways conflict with the current culture. That's what we shall do too. We are not supposed to withhold the word but to speak it out. Faith doesn't seek an easy way but one engaged with love. Put ourselves in the shoes of the ones we care about before we speak. Then we are not imposing but evangelizing. Amen.