

Jeremiah's vexing task

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Sunday's Coming Premium

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Rembrandt, *Jeremiah lamenting over the destruction of Jerusalem* [detail].

*"Under the weight of your hand I sat alone."* (Jer. 15:17)

When the yellow buses roll each fall, I remember my elementary schoolteachers and say a prayer of thanksgiving, recalling each name and face. Mildred Chaffin, my fifth-grade teacher at Elbert S. Long School in Chattanooga, was a major player in shaping my early perceptions of God. You did not fool around in Mrs. Chaffin's class. You did not laugh or ever horse around, and even on the playground only guardedly so. It took only a direct gaze from her to address any hint of disorder or rebellion—a gaze I was certain could crack granite. We sat in robotic rows and hardly ever moved from fear of her, sharpening pencils and moving through the lunch line in timed precision like a small platoon of marines. I would rather have wet my pants than ask to go to the bathroom at an unscheduled time. (Woe to the poor child who accidentally passed gas during geography.)

I came to associate Mrs. Chaffin with God, who could somehow see and know everything even when facing the blackboard. This was 1967, and she preached in class occasionally, using the Bible to undergird her convictions. Once Mrs. Chaffin asked me to serve as class monitor, which was supposed to be something of an honor, but your friends hated you for it. You sat up front at the teacher's desk and took names. "I'll be down the hall for just a minute," said God, "and I know you'll be very good boys and girls, especially since Frank is in charge"—the little snitch.

I still wonder about a boy named Kenny. I wonder if he's in prison. Kenny phoned in a false bomb threat when we were in junior high. All the boys (how gender-biased was that?) were paraded into the gym. Policemen wanted a confession from somebody. They led Kenny away.

During my half-hour tenure as hired informant for God, Kenny ran to the blackboard and with manic glee repeatedly spelled a variety of four-letter words, even the shocking ones, erasing them with each daring gallop. It's hard for a class monitor to ignore this.

God returned to class soon enough. She knew something was up. All eyes rested on me, and then on Kenny, who was rather large for a fifth grader, and back again to me. I still sometimes wake up in the middle of the night, sweating from this memory.

The thing about serving as a prophet is that you are forever stuck between what God wants and what the people want. It's a rather tiring vocation. I'm not sure anybody ever really volunteers for the job. Take Jeremiah, for instance. God says in chapter one of the book bearing his name: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born . . . I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (1:5).

Well that sounds special, like something you might find on a Hallmark card, but here's my take on God's gestational action with Jeremiah. Perhaps he called the old boy to be a prophet when he did because a baby cannot object. "Go, young Jeremiah, and say things to wayward adults that will get them hopping mad." You've got to hand it to God. A small child who cannot even talk will have a hard time questioning this commission.

Jeremiah did not have an easy life in trying to be faithful to God. I suppose that's true for any of us, but Jeremiah had a particularly tough time of it because God said something like, "OK, class, I'm going to be down the hall and away from you for just a little while. I've appointed Jeremiah to serve as class monitor, and he'll be my ears

and eyes and mouth."

Many people ran back and forth to the blackboard, so to speak, during the prophet's tenure, and he had to take names. People got mad, threw him in stocks, tossed him into a cistern with three feet of mud in the bottom, called him names and smacked him around. Jeremiah was even instructed by the Lord to remove his underwear, bury it near a rock by a river, then dig it up and wear it as a symbol of the unfaithfulness of the people—they weren't clinging closely enough to God as good underwear should. Thank God Mrs. Chaffin did not ask me to do this!

It was no kind of life, this prophet's life. So even though Jeremiah could not talk back to God in the womb, in chapter 15 we find that the old boy has had enough of the prophetic life. Jeremiah gives it to God with both barrels. He asks God to smite his opponents. He blames God for his sufferings. He recalls the past delight in the relationship, which is no longer delightful. He complains about his isolation, citing his complete lack of a social life. (I can't imagine the prophet ever attending anything resembling a wild party, but Jeremiah reminds God he's never once had fun because of this ridiculous calling.) At prayer's end, he bluntly describes God as a dry creek bed. There is no amen at the end of this prayer, which suggests that Jeremiah has more to say but won't say it.

Years ago my wife and I were hiking the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania. It was a very hot and dry summer. We were each down to a single swallow of water. The guidebook assured us that a spring was just ahead on a side trail. I took our water bottles and climbed down a very steep trail, one-quarter mile, to the spring. It was dry—bone dry. "You, God, are like that useless spring," prayed Jeremiah. "Dry, untrustworthy."

This is quite a prayer. I'm pretty sure that if somebody burst into our quiet, controlled liturgies and prayed this prayer with prophetic vehemence and unbridled despair and volume, we might ask an usher to call the police. But God listens to the one whom he has called from the womb. God allows Jeremiah to vent about the vexing parts of Jeremiah's job. God surely knows exactly how hard it is to be a prophet.

But God also speaks, and Jeremiah receives a direct answer from God concerning his complaints. You might expect a bit of patience and understanding from God—maybe a moment of hand-holding or six weeks of therapy on someone's couch for the tired

prophet. But there is none of this.

"Look, mister," God seems to say, "if you turn back from this nonsense you're mouthing, I'll take you back. I know these people. They're going to fight against you, but they won't prevail over you, for I am with you to save and deliver you."

God needs the prophet. The prophet is downhearted, but God needs the prophet to speak. The prophet is worn out, but God needs the prophet to speak to ungrateful people. The prophet needs a reminder.

In *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin*, Garret Keizer gets to the heart of Jeremiah's weariness: "The thing that makes us the most angry with God, more angry than droughts and famines, male pattern baldness and cellulite, is God's mercy."

It is the mercy of God, the love of God for his people, that has driven the prophetic vocation in any century. We need prophets. We need people who tell us what we don't want to hear. God sends them back in there. Let's pray for the Jeremiahs, for those who stand between God and his people.

I am no prophet. I'm a weary pastor who knows that Kenny still lurks in the pew, waiting to accost me at the church door or in a board meeting. Perhaps Jeremiah's old and honest prayer will temper my vocational timidity and give me the courage to name what needs naming around this school that is church.