

A message from alongside (Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30)

It is not just his words that make Jeremiah a prophet. It is his willingness to share in the judgment.

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When I was a little girl, we went to a big church downtown. The many steps to the sanctuary were steep. At the door the ushers greeted us. Once inside, I remember looking up to the ceiling, where the lights hung down from brass ropes. I spent part of that hour in worship wondering whether the lights would ever fall on us. I also listened to the pastor's voice, although I could never see him.

At the end of the service, we shook hands with the pastor, and he seemed like an ordinary person to me, not "the voice" that I heard when I was sitting in the pew. He seemed ordinary and sort of old (but remember, I was only five).

Somewhere along the line, someone told me that the pastor was an ordinary person—except for when he stepped into the pulpit. Then he was not ordinary. Then he spoke the words of God.

These were awe-inspiring words to me. How do we know when we are speaking words that God has put in our mouths? How do we know when the words are just our own opinions, whether fiery or comforting?

In clergy groups, pastors commiserate over the times when we have spoken a prophetic word, and people have gotten up and walked out. We may have been sure that God gave us a prophetic word, but not everyone was convinced. But if the gospel reading from Luke is any indication, this is not an uncommon reaction to speaking the word that God has given us.

Still, I wonder: How do we know? How do we know that the words we speak have been put in our mouths by God? That's the promise that God gives Jeremiah, a promise he never asked for. In fact, he tries to wiggle out of it. I believe that God has given me a word to speak, but I also know that I am not Jesus or Jeremiah.

I will confess that the portions of Jeremiah I love the most are the ones where he comes back to comfort Judah, after all of his dire predictions have come true. After he has been called a traitor, after he has called Judah to a repentance they are not willing to hear, Jeremiah laments. He goes with them in exile and reminds them to seek the welfare of the city where they are living.

I'm thinking right now that it is not just the words that Jeremiah speaks that make him a prophet. It is his willingness to share in the judgment, in the lamentation, in the exile. When he speaks the word of God, it is not a word from above. It is the word of God with the people, whether judgment or grace.

Somehow it seems to me that if I am going to speak for God, it will come from the people. Not above them, but with them.