

The God of Jeremiah
Jeremiah 1:4-10

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October 18, 2020

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. Jer. 1:10

No modern religious thinker has been more influential over Christianity than the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. When Barth described what influenced him, he pointed to one of his older colleagues: Hermann Kutter. From Kutter, he said, he learned how “to speak the great word ‘God’ seriously, responsibly, and with a sense of its importance.”¹

My aim in this course of sermons this fall is to do for you what Hermann Kutter did for Karl Barth: help you to say again the great word *God*.

Psalms 106 is almost the Bible in miniature. It tells of the history of the people of God up to that point. It tells all God had done for the people throughout the years, chiefly in their deliverance from captivity in Egypt. There was all that wonder of the mighty and miraculous deliverance, the psalmist said, but then he laid this charge against the people of that time: “They forgot God” (Ps. 106:21)

We are always susceptible to the same flaw. When life is going well and we don’t think we need any help, God is hardly a thought. When life is crammed with business and chores and responsibilities and strains and stresses, God gets crowded out of our thinking and isn’t given a place in our schedules. After a while we may try to say the word *God*, but there is no idea behind the thought any more. Our faith still has words but the words have no content for us, and words without content are meaningless.

We need to be able to say the great word *God* again. So I have been leading us through some of the books in the Bible and teaching how God is portrayed in these books. Find the sermons online. Print them off. Study them. We’ve seen God in the Book of Genesis, in the Book of Exodus, and in the Book of Isaiah. Next week we will turn to the New Testament and think of the God of Thomas from the Gospel According to John. Today our subject is the God of Jeremiah.

Our focus is on the God of Jeremiah and not on Jeremiah himself, but you may be interested to know that Jeremiah came from a religious family. His father was a priest (Jer. 1:1). His career started when he was young and spanned some forty years. The time period for his public life is something like 626 BC to 580 BC.² That’s Jeremiah.

¹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, tr. by John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 76.

² James Muilenburg, “Jeremiah the Prophet,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 823.

What about the God of Jeremiah? We learn a great deal about the God of Jeremiah right in the first chapter when Jeremiah tells us of his call to be a prophet.

The God of Jeremiah is a God who calls young leaders.

God has a history of raising up new leaders. God worked wonderfully with old leaders. Moses had his day and his record of achievement under God. Elijah had his day and his powerful influence as a leader for the sake of God. But nothing human can last. The day of Moses came to an end. The day of Elijah came to its end. The new day, the new occasion, called for new duties and new gifts of leadership and responsibility. And so Joshua followed Moses and Elisha followed Elijah. Now here, in the first chapter of a new book of the Bible, God is calling a new leader: Jeremiah. He has not been on the Bible's pages before. He is God's servant for a new day and a new time and a new work. God raises up new leaders.

God raises up young leaders. Jeremiah is quite self-conscious about his age when we meet him. He senses that God is giving him a big job in a big place, but he feels as though he is still a boy (Jer. 1:6). No doubt he is aware of what he does not know and no doubt he feels intimidated at being placed in a position of leadership over people who are his elders. We soon learn that though Jeremiah may be young, the Ancient of Days is promised to be with him (1:8), and so he has the authority of ordination behind him as well as the preparation given him.

Jeremiah's God – this God we have been hearing about: the God of Genesis, the God of Exodus, the God of Isaiah – puts us on notice in the first chapter of a new book that no one should expect the old leader to go on forever. Moreover, no one should reject the new leader who follows simply because he or she may be young. The community should be ready to welcome the one God loves, consecrates, and appoints (1:5).

There is also this. God raises up young leaders who are different than their elders. Young Jeremiah is a prophet. His father was a priest. The two worked in the same religious field. The two had the same aim. Prophet and priest both hope to lead people close to God. But though prophet and priest work in the same field and have the same aim, they have different approaches in their work. They labor in different ways with different emphases and different styles. Our take-away can be that the God of Jeremiah raises up new leaders who may be young, and wishes them not to carry on the old work in the same way but to do faithfully a fresh work in a new way all for the sake of the health of the on-going community. God raises up young leaders.

The God of Jeremiah is a God who tears some things down.

If the Book of Genesis shows us a God who creates and if the Book of Exodus shows us a God who delivers, the Book of Jeremiah shows us a God who rebuilds. The work of rebuilding begins with tearing some things down.

The assignment given to Jeremiah is described in three pairs of words. Young Jeremiah is appointed to a position of leadership and his assigned task is "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." (1:10) Three pairs of words: pluck up and pull down; destroy and overthrow; build and plant. While the main goal of the new work is constructive – to build and to plant – the emphasis seems to fall at first on the work of

deconstruction, for the first two word pairs – pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow – both have to do with an important work of undoing something so something else can take its place. The God of Jeremiah, then, is a God who tears some things down.

Scattered throughout the rest of the Book of Jeremiah are images and indications of the things God wants torn down. God wants to tear down human constructs that have grown up but which detract and divert people from the ways of God and a proper relationship with God. Later verses give us vivid word pictures of what these things might be.

There is the cracked cistern (2:13). A cistern differs from a well in that a cistern collects the water that falls into it while a well draws fresh water from deep resources. Jeremiah's God complains that the people of that day were settling for a cistern they themselves dug rather than the fresh and deep well God has provided. Not only that, the cistern they have chosen is cracked; it can't even hold what they think it holds. If the people would but look to the well that is deep and draw from it, they would learn how to say the word *God* again seriously, responsibly, with its sense of importance, and be refreshed in spirit and strength.

Another image of what must come down is the broken yoke (2:20). A yoke is a symbol of partnership allowing two to accomplish something difficult by sharing in the hard work that is required. The partnership in the yoke Jeremiah has in mind is a partnership between God and the people. If the people would only partner with God who wants to partner with them, there is no amount of heavy lifting that cannot be done. But the people have broken the yoke. They have forsaken their partnership with God. That going along trying to do hard work without God has to be done away with.

Another image is that of the scarecrow in a cucumber field (10:5). Jeremiah compares the idols people have made to scarecrows in a cucumber field. Those false gods have no life. They have to be carried around. They can't speak. They can't do anything. They are empty and pointless. Why try to protect your cucumber field – your crop, your welfare, your well-being – with a lifeless thing such as that. Set aside your scarecrows, your false gods, and look to the one true living and loving God who can actually do something and feel something and say something and react to something.

Of course these images from Jeremiah all lead us to question what human constructs we are perpetuating here that are false, unproductive, and no longer fit for this new day. What cisterns are cracked? What yokes are broken? What scarecrows are standing lifeless in our fields? The God of Jeremiah calls new leaders to help God's people see these things and tear them down.

The God of Jeremiah is a God who tears things down in order to make a new beginning.

We come now to the third pair of words in Jeremiah's commission: "to build and to plant." God tears down in order to build up. James S. Stewart taught that it is the nature of God always to go beyond the best God has already done.³ The goal God has in working with God's people is always to move them forward to a new blessing that is positive, and not backward to

³ James S. Stewart, *River of Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p. 134. The specific sermon is "Expect Great Things from God," and it was written to be preached at a church anniversary.

something that is diminished, unsatisfying, and unrewarding. The tearing down is always for the sake of a building up. The uprooting is always for the sake of planting.

Jeremiah saw this on display in the potter's shed (18:1-11). Down at a potter's house Jeremiah saw an artist at his wheel molding clay into a pitcher or a bowl. The skilled eye of the potter saw, however, that some flaw was developing. Something wasn't right about the vessel coming into being, and so he deftly reworked it, changing it from what was into something better. The new was not a lesser vessel. It was different and it was better. So God is always working as a potter in the shed, molding us after God's will into something different from what we are and into something better that God wants us to be.

Jeremiah caught sight of a new deliverance (16:14-15). Up to that point the greatest thing that could be said was that God brought the people out of their slavery in Egypt. Now Jeremiah saw there was to be a new movement. It would take nothing away from the old but would be profound and wonderful in its own way. In his case, he saw that God was going to deliver people out of the exile that had befallen them. Jeremiah says that the wonderful God of the exodus will be known by a new generation for the new and marvelous deliverance God was about to make happen. We can trust in this God of the new deliverance even now in the midst of the exile we are in. "Our God will see us through."

Above all, Jeremiah caught sight of a new covenant. The God of Jeremiah is the God of the covenant. The word *covenant* appears several times throughout the book. Covenant is God's way of approaching people with authority and with the offer of grace, calling forth and establishing a life of strength and joy.⁴ A study of covenants in scripture would begin way back in Genesis at creation and continue through Noah and Abraham, and into Exodus with Moses at Sinai. Jeremiah hears the promise of a new covenant (31:31). Christians see that he is already peering ahead to Jesus. The new covenant is not going to like the old, written in stone. It will be new and written right on the hearts of people. And it will all be in the context of God's awesome love, which is rich in forgiveness and splendor and friendship and companionship.

The God of Jeremiah calls new leaders who may be young and asks them to tear down what may have become encrusted or stopped up. And God works through that new leader to bring about life and strength anew, a life and strength that will lead to new spiritual prosperity and joy.

⁴ Andrew W. Blackwood, *Preaching from Prophetic Books* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1951), p. 154. Blackwood draws upon George Adam Smith in defining covenant as something that grows out of love rather than law.