

## **“I’m Not Sure I Can Do This”**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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*<sup>4</sup>Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, <sup>5</sup>“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” <sup>6</sup>Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” <sup>7</sup>But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, <sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” <sup>9</sup>Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup>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.” (Jeremiah 1:4-10)*

There is a memorable scene in the 1989 movie “Glory,” which tells the story of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry Regiment, one of the first Black regiments to serve in the Civil War. John Rawlins, one of the first volunteers, had proven himself to be thoughtful, wise, and courageous. When it becomes likely that the 54<sup>th</sup> will soon see action, Rawlins is called up before the company by a commissioned officer, who announces that, “in recognition of initiative taken not only for [himself] but on behalf of the entire regiment,” Rawlins was being promoted to the rank of Sergeant Major. As the men cheer and applaud, Colonel Robert Shaw comes forward to congratulate him personally. Rawlins, clearly stunned by the sudden promotion, says quietly, “I’m not sure I want this, Colonel.”

To which the Colonel replies, “I know exactly how you feel.”<sup>1</sup>

And he did. When the Governor of Massachusetts chose Shaw to lead the 54<sup>th</sup>, the young white officer knew that he was being assigned a perilous and largely thankless job.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the mortal threat posed by enemies on the battlefield, Shaw and his men also confronted pernicious racism from within the Union Army itself. So, Shaw certainly did know how it feels to be chosen for a difficult task and wonder whether you are really up to the challenge.

All of us can relate. Maybe it is a class that is proving to be much harder than we ever imagined. Maybe we see an injustice that is harming innocent people, a wrong that clearly needs to be put right, but it is so entrenched that we don’t even know where to begin. Maybe it is a difficult conversation that we know we need to have with another person, but we just keep putting it off because we know it will be so painful and so hard. Maybe a medical diagnosis has taken us by surprise and rocked our world. At some point, everyone knows how it feels to say, “I don’t know if I can do this.”

So you may not be surprised to hear that this was a consistent theme for most of the prophets in the Bible. When God first calls them and commissions them to some

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<sup>1</sup> “Promotion to SGT Major,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9U9cnb5my0Q>, March 13, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> “54th Massachusetts Regiment,” <https://www.nps.gov/articles/54th-massachusetts-regiment.htm>.



kind of heavenly service, they all resist the call. All of them doubt whether they can do what God is asking them to do. It is only after God reassures them -- promises to help them, strengthen them, and stay with them -- only then were those prophets able to stand up and take on the job that God had given them.

Jeremiah was no different. But to be fair, he lived in very tumultuous times. Israel was still reeling from the Assyrian invasion, but now an even greater threat was building in the east. The powerful armies of Babylon were pressing in. Another conquest seemed inevitable, and the Kings of Judah and the Northern Kingdom were panicking. Politically, things looked awful. Militarily, things looked awful. For everyday people, who were just trying to make ends meet, things looked awful. And it is in this bleak context that God appears to Jeremiah and gives him a new calling as "*a prophet to the nations.*" And what does Jeremiah say? "The problem is, God, I am not so great with the talking. I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

In other words, "I'm not sure I can do this."

This morning I want to dive deeper into that response to God. What was Jeremiah saying when he resisted the call to be a prophet who would speak God's truth in a public way?

One way we might interpret this moment is that Jeremiah legitimately thought he ***lacked the skills and experience to do the job.*** If that was what Jeremiah was saying, he was in good company, because Moses had done the very same thing. When God appeared in the burning bush and told Moses that he was to be God's representative before Pharaoh, that he would be the one to negotiate the release of God's people, and that he would be the one to lead them all out of Egypt, Moses immediately pushed back. "Why me? Who am I to do this?" God answered every question, never wavering in his choice.

And then, seemingly as a last resort, Moses told God he just didn't have what it took. "O my Lord," Moses says, "I have never been eloquent... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Maybe he was just saying that he was not good with words, didn't have "the gift of the gab." But some scholars suggest that it was more than that -- that Moses may have had a speech impediment, perhaps a stutter. Whatever it was, Moses clearly doubted his skills and abilities. "Please, Lord," he begged. "Send someone else."

Maybe that was what Jeremiah was thinking, too. Speaking truth to kings would require great skill in the art of rhetoric. His words needed to be strong, persuasive, and convincing, and maybe he worried he that he just wasn't up for the challenge. If you've ever doubted whether you had what it took to do something hard, then you know that feeling.

Then again, maybe Jeremiah was worried about something else. Maybe he wasn't doubting his ability to do what God wanted him to do. Maybe he feared that ***he didn't have the heart to do it.*** This is the theory of the scholars responsible for the famous Geneva Bible of 1599, which contained notes that were handwritten in the margins by giants of the Reformation like John Calvin and John Knox. One note written next to this passage in Jeremiah suggest that the would-be prophet, as he pondered the terrible and threatening news that God was asking him to share, was

moved with compassion and pity for all the people who would perish.<sup>3</sup> After all, it was clear that God wanted him to carry some terrible, even violent news. *“I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,”* God told Jeremiah, *“to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow.”* The message was that Israel was going to be overrun, torn down, pillaged and burned.

Now, most people, I would say, love to be bearers of good news. The cancer is in full remission. The missing child was found. You just won \$100,000 from Publishers Clearing House. When you get to bring someone good tidings, you get to be the emcee for a celebration.

On the other hand, no one really enjoys bearing unhappy news. As the young author Emma Abdullah has written, *“Being the bearer of bad news is a terrible thing; sometimes you don't know if you'll have the words, the delicacy, the strength. You think of the person on the other side: how you're about to bring their world crashing down with a single phone call...”*<sup>4</sup> This is what the Reformers saw in Jeremiah's objection. He was reluctant to accept a job that would require him to share awful news on a regular basis. It would break his heart, and he just wasn't sure he could do it.

But there is a third possibility that may be the most likely one. It is rooted in an ancient wartime practice, when the only way for warring factions to communicate with one another was to send a runner across the battle lines. The unwritten rule was that, as a matter of practicality and justice, these messengers should not be harmed. This is the historical and literary origin of the common phrase, *“Don't shoot the messenger.”*<sup>5</sup>

But the reason that this saying is still a saying, is that messengers got shot all the time. Jeremiah may have been young, but he was old enough to realize that, if he was the one who had to go tell kings that their kingdom would fall, tell cities that they were going to get burned and pillaged, and also say that everything bad that was about to happen was their fault, because they had not listened to God and lived the way God wanted them to live... it was almost certain that he would be punished for it – mentally, emotionally, and probably physically. They were going to shoot the messenger.

And we know from the book of Jeremiah that this is exactly what happened. Kings and powerful people hated him. False prophets who had sucked up to the kings ridiculed him. At one point in his ministry, Jeremiah felt so alone, so beat down, that he told God it would have been better if he had never been born. If we could see this kind of suffering on the horizon, wouldn't we say *“I'm not sure I can do this”*? Wouldn't our response be, *“Please, Lord, find somebody else”*?

It could have been any or all of those reasons that Jeremiah wanted to take a pass on God's call. But here is the main point we need to see. That was not the end of the story. Not for Moses... not for Isaiah... not for Jonah... and certainly not for Jeremiah. All of them resisted God's call, but in the end, all of them ended up accepting their commission and doing hard but amazing things in service to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Geneva Study Bible, Jeremiah 1:6, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gsb/jeremiah/1.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4218362-being-the-bearer-of-bad-news-is-a-terrible-thing>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dont-shoot-messenger-andrea-wojnicky-mba-dba-ekbwc/>

When prophets resisted, God never wavered about the choice. Instead, God responded with reassurance, encouragement, and a promise to be with the prophet through thick and thin. *“Do not be afraid of them,”* God said to Jeremiah, *“for I am with you to deliver you.”* Then the Lord reached out and touched Jeremiah on the mouth – a symbolic act to bless and affirm Jeremiah’s ability to speak with maturity and power, that Jeremiah would be given the right words to say, just when they needed to be said.

When I was growing up -- or to use Jeremiah’s words -- when I was just a boy, Joe Mullin was the minister of my family’s church. He was a really good pastor. Not perfect by any stretch, but a great preacher and leader. In one of his final sermons before retirement, he shared the story of how he had first been called to be the minister back in the early 70’s. I won’t go into details, but that story had all the elements of Jeremiah’s call: a call to a job... followed by obstacles, resistance, and concerns that he might not be able to do it... followed by a glorious moment of confirmation and assurance God would be with him, and that he need not be afraid. He told that story so he could share one lesson, one thing that he wanted everyone to know and understand... and it was this (and I am quoting him here):

“If you believe that God is calling you to give yourself to a cause that is greater than you... if you believe that God is calling you to undertake some task or assume some position that is over your head... if you get a mandate from the Lord to do it, then the Lord is going with you every step of the way giving you energy, guidance, insight, strength, and courage to do what he has called you to do.”<sup>6</sup>

That promise is not just for prophets and preachers. It is for anyone and everyone who senses a call to do a hard thing... to have that tough conversation... to right that wrong... to face that diagnosis. Last week’s sermon was about gifts – the idea that every person is blessed by God with gifts that can make the world a better place. God gave you those gifts with the expectation that you will use them, that you will take initiative not only for yourself, but on behalf of the company you are with. Self-doubt, fear, worry – all of these can hold us back. They can make us think we do not have the skills, that we do not have the heart, or that we cannot bear the cost of things we feel that we should do. But the witness of the prophets is that, when we sense that God is calling us to a cause greater than ourselves, God will bless our efforts and give us what we need to get it done.

William Shakespeare once wrote “Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.”<sup>7</sup>

That is true, but I find even more inspiration from something that Vincent van Gogh once said. “If you hear a voice within you say, ‘You cannot paint,’ then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced.”<sup>8</sup>

If there is something on your heart, and you feel that God is behind it, but you find yourself unsure about whether you can do it, know that God wants you to paint. God wants you to– use the gifts you have been given to make this world a more beautiful and loving place. And when you do, know that God will be with you. **Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph B. Mullin, “Now That I Know You Better,” *Grab Life* p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/21546-our-doubts-are-traitors-and-make-us-lose-the-good>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/vincent\\_van\\_gogh\\_104644](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/vincent_van_gogh_104644)