

Before diving into a reading of scripture, especially a reading that falls at the very beginning of a book of the bible, it is helpful to review and familiarize yourself with the context in which the book was birthed. The context sheds light on the spirit, emotion, and intent of the book. And, because the bible is a compilation of many books from many different contexts, we can consider each scripture, each book, to be a glimpse and part of God’s larger narrative. Some have even come to call it “His- Story”.

Today, we are invited to encounter the book of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah is prophetic. The word of God given to the Israelites through Jeremiah are words that sear the soul, challenge the conscience, and provide promised hope to the wounded body and spirit. The principal subject of Jeremiah is survival as the book tries to come to terms with and move beyond destruction wrought by Babylon’s three invasions of Judah and its chief city, Jerusalem. Let’s just say the era in which the book of Jeremiah was written was a time of turmoil and upheaval.

Now, when I say a time of turmoil and upheaval, what do I mean? In the most important of senses, I mean the nation’s collapse put into question Judah’s relationship with God. For Judah, the fabric of daily life in the community was destroyed, and the symbolic world that supported life collapsed as well. Had God forgotten the chosen people? How could God allow their devastation? Had God turned away from the covenant made at Sinai: Was God powerless compared to the powerful Babylonian deities who had won the war? How could the community survive disaster that had befallen them? Did the survivors have a future and if so, who would have power in a restored community? All of these questions and let’s be honest, real concerns, haunt the book of Jeremiah.

The man and prophet Jeremiah plays a large role in holding together the events shared within this book. His life is a rich symbol of the nation’s demise and restoration. Jeremiah remained unmarried and bore no children. To the Israelites, this meant the end of life in the land because no generation would be there to carry on. Jeremiah is arrested, imprisoned, and left in a cistern to die, narrowly escaping with his life. He loses everything, but he survives. In his survival, he buys a plot of land to symbolize the renewed life that will come in the future.

Amid all the turmoil and upheaval, this book seeks to defend God from the charge of injustice or impotence in the fall of the nation. God wasn’t creating the turmoil and

upheaval, the tragedies were a result of human sin. Despite the communities' sinfulness, the second half of Jeremiah affirms that God will bring the Israelites into a future full of promise.

Sounds a bit like the opening narration of a Star Wars or Star Trek or Marvel series setting the page for the action about to unfold. Perhaps it too sounds a bit like Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, Western NC, California...

Jeremiah 1:4-10 are the verses of Jeremiah's call into action from God...

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "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." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." 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. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." 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. See, today I appoint you over the nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

How many of you have ever encountered God in this way? Up close and personal? I would venture to say this is not the way in which we associate with God encounters. That doesn't mean God hasn't approached us this way. Perhaps, just like Jeremiah, in which God called him before his birth, our encounter with God happened before we were born. We do encounter in the Psalms that God knows us even before we are born. We also encounter in Genesis that the creation of humanity from the beginning was to enjoy God and glorify God in all we are and do. We are created for good things, for God things. Jeremiah was created to be a prophet to the nations at a time of turmoil and upheaval- lucky him, huh! We too have been created for such a time as this. Is it turmoil and upheaval? Some might say yes and others no, but whatever is going on, the meaning for your presence in this time is heaven sent.

Given the events and things going on around him, Jeremiah did what Moses did, perhaps what many of us do, "I am not qualified. I don't have the words." We might even tell God to go on to the next person on the list because God is wasting time asking us. God's intentions for Jeremiah, God's intentions for us, are significant and since God creates us and calls us into the work of God's kingdom, Jeremiah had no choice in the matter. And to reiterate that, God works with Jeremiah to build confidence and faith that God has not only been before him, but God also says, "I am with you to deliver you."

For God to stand next to you and say, “I am with you to deliver you”, must be a bit like the footprint’s poem, in which we can acknowledge it is no longer our self-appointed efforts leaving footprints in the sand, and trust that those are the footprints of God, and God is carrying us through.

God promises to be with you and God will put whatever it takes for you to accomplish God’s mission and ministry in you. I believe this to be true of Jeremiah. I believe this to be true of Moses. I believe this to be true of David. I believe this to be true of Jesus. I believe this to be true for all of us individually and I believe this to be true of us collectively as Christ’s church.

Now, to what is God calling Jeremiah and subsequently, maybe us as we read these words. To summarize the book of Jeremiah and the call of Jeremiah himself, the role is one of destroying that which needs to be destroyed, that which is not of God or of God’s character- we might even take a bit of liberty to say transform alongside destroy, for isn’t to transform something or someone to turn it or them from the wrong to the right? We can consider this internally as well in the transforming of our hearts and minds to God. Some things need to be destroyed and/ or transformed. How do we accomplish this? First, we must acknowledge that there are things in our lives that need to be destroyed or transformed to make room for healthy growth- pride, false gods, idols we have built up in our own minds (some might refer to these as sacred cows), doubt, control/power- and then we must work toward plucking, pulling, pruning, overthrowing. “But so much is at stake if I lose what I know and have become accustomed too,” says just about every one of us, including Job and the rich man looking to get into heaven. God’s promise is sure. God is before you and God is with you to deliver you.

Whereas destroying is the hard and scary role, it is necessary for the fulfilling role to begin and that is the role of rebuilders. After something is destroyed or transformed, it is not simply left alone. Rebuilding is a necessary next step. Start by buying a plot of land in which to build, plant a seed that can be harvested later, start a conversation, take a step in the right direction, get out of bed. How you might ask? God is before you and God is with you to deliver you. Can you trust that? Can you have faith in God to fulfill this promise? More than anything or anyone else. Don’t believe me!? Try God on for size and see just how fitting God is for the best life. And I don’t just mean put God on your feet, or your arms, or wear God as a hat. God cannot be compared to an accessory item. God is the whole outfit, top to bottom, inside and out.

Are we willing to put on the whole wardrobe, the whole armor of God. Or as Paul wrote to the Ephesians in chapter 6: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes of

peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit. With this armor, you will not only know more than ever that God is before you and with you, but you will also feel and experience God before you and with you.

One final thing for today. At the end of listing the elements of the armor of God, Paul goes on to say... "Pray!" For prayer is a necessary act for us in our spiritual battles through life. "But I don't know what to say when I am praying," says many looking for someone else to do it. Sounds like Jeremiah. Instead of redirecting God's call for us to someone else, even from generation to generation, maybe we can borrow words from Psalm 71: 1-6...

"In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you."

God is before you and God is with you to deliver you!