

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Not a Lot of Fancy Talk

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It is a given that scripture inspires and guides our faith. Over the millennia, its treasure trove of stories also inspired plotlines repeated in plays, novels, and now in film and TV.

Even those indifferent to faith or clueless where in scripture the storied emerge will understand the concept of a story that models a Prodigal Son, a wayward youth's homecoming, or David and Goliath, the underdog victor.

Another plotline, not unique to the Bible, but evident in many stories is shaped by what writers call a "fish-out-of-water" character.

The "fish-out-of-water," as the name implies, refers to someone who is removed from their day-to-day activities and immersed in a new setting or shoulders new responsibilities for which they possess absolutely no gifts or qualifications.

Contemporary examples include *Ted Lasso* - an American football coach tossed into European football and ignorant of the customs known by every pub-goer in London. The old show, *3rd Rock From the Sun*, is obvious. Aliens disguised as a human family land on Earth to report back about our lifestyles. These characters ask questions about what's going on that everyone else takes for granted. A viewer sees the world through their eyes - sometimes comedic.

In scripture, the fish-out-of-water is often the person least likely to assume a mantle of authority, speak the truth, or influence change. Rarely comedic, they reveal to the reader the absurdity or corruption or injustice in place at the time. Their ignorance of or indifference to the status quo allows them to ask questions that silence or intimidate others.

Today's reading, from the lectionary, highlights the origin of the prophet Jeremiah's fish-out-of-water-ness. No one could possibly expect, even himself, that he could become one of the most prolific prophets.

Before I read, please pray with me.

Dear God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your lips. Make us hungry for your divine message. Settle us now to hear Jeremiah's call so our hearts accept your claim on our lives. And we become willing to spread your son's good news with our words. Amen.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵“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.”

⁶Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” ⁷But 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.
⁸Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
says the LORD.”

⁹Then the LORD put out their hand and touched my
mouth, and the LORD said to me,
“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
¹⁰See, 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.”

A fellow minister tells the story of her friend who was elected as a representative to the state legislature. This candidate seized the campaign trail in 2018 to upset an incumbent. At the time, her chief qualifications to be a lawmaker were skills groomed by running a church camp for a dozen years.

She knew how to herd cats figurately, handle conflict, cast a vision, and teach others to sing while doing it. Her art of whimsy stuck as well. When group pictures are taken in the legislative chambers, she wears a feather boa of her party’s color.

During her first term, she amused her friends with tales about playing cards in the cafeteria with her party members while

the representatives from the other party gave grandstanding speeches on the house floor. Then they'd fold their cards, file back in, and vote their consciences.

Later, some criticized this rookie for not understanding the way things are done. She continued to vote her conscience and kept her campaign promises to her constituents, even when it caused her to go against party leadership.

In the next legislative session, they demoted her to a seat at the back of the chambers—next to those from the opposing party. This fish-out-of-water in the legislature, became a fish-out-of-water among her own party. She took what others saw as a time-out type of punishment as a new approach to do her job.

This time, she got to know the representatives around her.

She told them about why she voted as she did on critical justice issues and judicial appointments. She knew her district and spoke plainly about the people. Hearts and minds opened. In what used to be a hostile, polarized political environment, new relationships formed. And she began flipping some of those legislators on some of the votes. They voted on behalf of the people, not the party.

Her story of being not what anyone expected, not doing what was expected, her willingness to speak and to listen, gave way to a new way for all of them to serve.¹

Jeremiah's training to become a prophet paled in comparison. In the late 7th century BCE, with Judah in turmoil, no one, most of all Jeremiah, expected he could do what God asked. He understood the task to "pluck up and pull down" and "to plant" as it related to trees and soil, planting, and pruning. He apprenticed as an arborist.

This young boy's Jewish education likely did not include something as fun as summer camp nor hone any writing skills. His speech, quite candidly, lacks the eloquence or soaring poetry heard from other ancient prophets and his words remain only from the work of a scribe who accompanied him.

Jeremiah never campaigned for this role. But God, who formed him in the womb, knew him better than his parents, gave him all that he needed. Likely God chose him because he was an outsider.

Most prophets at the time were groomed for the position and paid by local sanctuaries or royal courts to keep the order.

¹Molly Baskette writes provocative and earthy reflections. She also writes lots of books. This story was inspired by [Daily Devotional for Small Group Discussion: The Back Row Caucus - United Church of Christ The Back Row Caucus \(ucc.org\)](#). Her nameless friend is Connecticut State Representative, Anne Hughes, [Anne Hughes Proactive CT](#)

God needed someone willing to get his hands dirty, who understood that before any rebuilding could occur, the weeds needed to be destroyed.

In what is the longest book in our bible, Jeremiah preached what sounds like an unpatriotic and seditious message against the leaders. The details sum up to: "Stop giving our people reckless lies and false hopes. Stop betraying them with your delusional messages of comfort and hope. National disaster is just around the corner."

With biting irony and bitter sarcasm Jeremiah compared the words of Judah's prophets to those who parlayed worshipping the pagan gods of Baal.

Maybe it is best to use plain language when calling out their actions as more evil than Sodom, alluding to promiscuity and human sacrifice. To speak so bluntly, Jeremiah said, made his heart break and his bones tremble.²

He aches with hopes for faithful people. For all his lashing out, he prayed for them and loved them. The images of him painted in the Sistine Chapel and by Rembrandt show a haggard prophet after decades of abuse and imprisonment for speaking the truth. He failed to accomplish what he'd hoped.

² Dan Clendenin, "False Hopes, Bad Dreams, and Reckless Lies: Jeremiah Yesterday and Today," *Journey with Jesus*, August 19, 2007, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20070813JJ.shtml>

Almost no one listened to him, but in the end, history proved him right. Babylon ravaged Judah and Jerusalem, throwing people from their homes and into exile.³ While in exile, the people remembered what he'd said. They finally looked at the mirror he'd held to accept they had believed populist lies. They weakened the community and abdicated their future in self-centered pep talks rather than doing the faithful work of keeping the covenant with God.

Jeremiah stars as a fish-out-of-water in our faith story. Even though he failed to persuade them to change their lying ways, his plain talk resonates throughout time as an example.

We need to listen to plain talk from everyone or we might find history repeat itself, by our blind loyalty to a way of life that will eventually starve us all. Be it climate change and the literal consequences of famine. Health care. Unwillingness to confront gun violence. Closing our eyes to our national history – the ways we've stumbled in trying to achieve the shining ideals. Keep the ideals. Learn from mistakes. Strive to be more perfect.

Jeremiah's story also reminds us that God speaks through everyone's life.

God fills each of our mouths with God's words and truth. Deep down we know that, we're daunted by that, and frankly, we're scared. And so, we use it as an excuse to stay silent, to live and

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988).

let live. God slides next to us, speaks to us just as they did to Jeremiah, “do not be afraid, I am with you.”

Let me close with a story of talk making a difference.

Father Greg Boyle buried one too many young men in 1988. The parish he served covered an area with eight gangs at war with the highest gang activity in Los Angeles.

He started Homeboy Industries to provide services to train young men and later young women with job skills and therapy to leave gangs. Silk-screening. Baking. Graffiti removal.

Homeboy Industries particularly welcomes those leaving prison who try to start over and is now the largest gang rehab and reentry organization in the world. Father Boyle writes and speaks about how his “homies,” as they call themselves, learn to allow their hearts to be altered. They feel God adore them.

I’m a fan of Boyle and have now heard him tell the story multiple times of going to Boston. He’d asked Saul and Brandon, who worked in the Homeboy bakery, if they would like to accompany him on the trip.

This was the first time in a plane and outside of LA for both young men. When they landed, Boyle encouraged them to discover Boston.

At one point, Saul snapped a selfie in front of a courthouse, unaware of the two homeless men, Louis and Bill, in the park nearby.

“Don’t take my picture,” Louis shouted at Saul.

“He’s taking a selfie,” Bill said, but Louis kept yelling.

Rather than retreat, this tatted former gangster from LA, Saul approached them and said, “My name is Saul, and I’m from Los Angeles.” Louis, belligerently, told him he did not care. He did not retreat. They talked.

“Don’t mind us, we’re crazy,” Bill said.

“I’m crazy, too,” Saul responded, and waited to continue.

The men talked for a while, and as Saul started to leave, Louis said, “I’ve lived my whole life in Boston, do you need directions or something?”

Just plain talk between these men dissolved fear.

After this encounter, Saul, Brandon, and Fr. Boyle went to the conference at Holy Cross High School and at the last last-minute added Saul to the program.

He told of learning what it was like to work, to receive a paycheck, get an apartment, start a family, to live as he never

thought possible. The way Fr. Boyle describes it, Saul just told his story. In his story of gang member and grace, everyone saw the truth; he was exactly what God had in mind when God made him. That's why the crowd responded with a standing ovation.

On the flight home, Saul told Boyle about his experience in the park with Louis and Bill. He knew something good happened in the auditorium. He said he wanted to learn more and more, and to learn how to talk fancy.

“What do you mean, fancy?” Boyle asked.

“Where the dad is waving good-bye to the mom and kids and says ‘Ta-ta’,” Saul said.

Boyle tells this story over and over...in podcasts, lectures, sermons.⁴ It's his story, it's Saul's story, it's God's story to remind us of the power of plain words to connect people without fancy talk.

This simple act of listening and speaking becomes the way we cherish and care for each other. This simple act may also allow the least likely person to confront us with God's truth. Like Jeremiah, God won't let us say, “I cannot do this. I can't challenge those who have a loud megaphone. I'll never be

⁴ Run to the nearest bookstore to pick up *Tattoos on the Heart, Barking at the Choir*, or Fr. Greg Boyle's latest, *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness*. Listening to his voice soothes my soul. Here is one example of his many lectures <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm81Fz8o-0w>.

successful in taking to strangers let alone getting the attention of narcissistic neighbors. The task is too big. I'll leave it to others. I am too small to make a difference."

And so, the Lord God comes to us also to say, as he did so long ago to Jeremiah, "Who ever said it was about you?" Trust me. Let me teach you. I'll be with you.



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