

THEME: Jeremiah: Faith for Tough Times

“A Fire Shut Up in My Bones”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

April 20-21, 2013 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

Jeremiah 1:4-9 and 20:7-9

These are the words of Jeremiah...The Lord gave me this message: “I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations.”

“O Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I can’t speak for you! I’m too young!”

The Lord replied, “Don’t say, ‘I’m too young,’ for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you. And don’t be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I, the Lord, have spoken!” Then the Lord reached out and touched my mouth and said, “Look, I have put my words in your mouth!”

O Lord, you misled me, and I allowed myself to be misled. You are stronger than I am, and you overpowered me. Now I am mocked every day; everyone laughs at me. When I speak, the words burst out. “Violence and destruction!” I shout. So these messages from the Lord have made me a household joke. But if I say I’ll never mention the Lord or speak in his name, his word burns in my heart like a fire. It’s like a fire in my bones! I am worn out trying to hold it in! I can’t do it!

VIDEO Jeremiah Week 1 Sermon Starter

SLIDE A Fire Shut Up In My Bones (Use Jeremiah background)

The Scripture that you just heard came from Jeremiah chapter 1 and Jeremiah chapter 20. They capture something of the call and the agony that Jeremiah felt in fulfilling his call. Today we begin a new sermon series on the prophet Jeremiah in which we will be looking at his prophecies and his writings and his life story. This is a challenge in an important book of the Bible. It is the longest book of the Bible by word count and it is one of the major prophets, which also include Isaiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah is sharing his prophetic words in a time which is the most strategically important in terms of the Jewish people after the time of Moses in the Old Testament.

Today, as we begin to study this difficult to understand book, I will be teaching you a little bit of history and a little bit of geography. After that, we will look at the Scripture passage before us today and ask what these Scriptures tell us about our lives, especially as we deal with tough times and challenges.

Please take out of your bulletin your Meditation Moments and your Message Notes. You will find the passage of Scripture that we heard listed at the top and then below that are some blank line for you to write something down. I hope you will take notes of anything you want to remember from today's message. I promise that you will learn something you didn't know today that will help you in the weeks ahead so please use that space. You then will find an opportunity for you to read the book of Jeremiah on your own. We are not going to read straight through it because the book of Jeremiah was not written chronologically. It doesn't start at the beginning of Jeremiah's life and then go to the end, though the end of the book is the end of Jeremiah's life. You actually go back and forth in the book to various events and so we are going to read the book a bit differently than you normally would read a book in the Bible. If you are watching online you can download this on your own and print it off at home.

The other thing I would like you to have out is this insert with a map on one side and a family tree on the other. I want you to put this insert in your Bible this week and try to remember to bring your Bible open the next few weeks if you would. I realize that many of you depend on the video screen and on our Bibles in the pews each week, but if you have a Bible please bring it and I think you'll find it helpful as we go through this study together. If you don't have a Bible then we would be happy to give you one. You can take one of these Bibles that are in the pews or we can recommend a study Bible for you that we have in our bookstore which will have better notes to help you read books like Jeremiah.

I know some of you are as interested in geography and history as I am but if you will hang with me for 10 minutes. I think you will find this very helpful in understanding the book of Jeremiah. The things I am about to describe for you are the stuff of his prophecies. He is not only foretelling things that are going to happen he is telling it like it is and saying that these things are happening and we have to pay attention geographically and historically.

SLIDE Jeremiah born in 644 BC

We think that Jeremiah was born around 644 BC. He began his ministry when he was around 16 years old which would be approximately 627 BC. The main Empire which was in power in this region during this time was the Assyrian Empire. If you look on the video screen you will see cool graphic depicting the map similar to the one that you have in your hands but giving you a picture of how the theory and Empire grew during this time.

SLIDE Map of Assyrian Empire 650 BC

Take a look at the video screen and you will see a map very similar to the one you have in your hands. This is the Assyrian Empire about the time that Jeremiah is born. We see the Mediterranean Sea over here on the left and modern-day Turkey above it. Europe is on the far left of the map and Egypt is down below the Mediterranean Sea. The region between the Tigris and Euphrates River is called the "Fertile Crescent." People were able to live in this area because there was water supply and you could grow crops. The area down below it is the Arabian Desert and you really didn't travel in this region unless you had to because it was very desolate and dry without much water.

This region on the left of the Fertile Crescent is Israel and you can see Jerusalem on the map. If you wanted to travel from Europe or Asia into Africa you had to travel through this region and vice versa. This makes this small piece of land one of the most valuable tactical assets of any Empire that wanted to be in control of more than one continent. All of the major trade routes ran through Israel and the Fertile Crescent.

This is really important for understanding much of what happens in the Old Testament. This meant that in ancient times Judah or Israel was like our modern day Suez Canal. Major trade passes through the Suez Canal as some 30,000 ships travel back and forth. Major trade caravans passed through this land of Judah because it was a part of that Fertile Crescent. You stay with the desert and you passed along the sea with two major highways, one of them called the "Kings Highway," and the other called the, "Way of the Sea." This is like I 70 and I 80 which travel across the United States.

Think of it this way. This small piece of land known as Judah during time of Jeremiah, and today known as Israel, connects three different continents: Africa, Asia and Europe. This is why every great Empire of the past wanted to control the land of Judah. The Assyrian Empire ruled this region for more than 100 years. The

Babylonian Empire then controlled for 70 years. The Persian Empire followed by the Greeks and the Romans and on and on as each Empire try to control the strategic piece of land. That is why it was called the land of milk and honey.

During the days of Jeremiah an Empire would fall and then there would be some independent for Judah, followed by another Empire which would rise up. This all happened within 45 years and Jeremiah is prophesying during this timeframe. He is literally talking about the history which is unfolding in his land during his time.

The Assyrian Empire had conquered the land of Judah in 722 BC. They conquered the nation of Israel to the North and they left Judah to the South more intact. They carried away the people of the North in Israel into slavery and exile. Judah was allowed to continue to exist and they existed in this space for another 140 years. For the first 100 years the Assyrians controlled the land and forced the people in Judah to pay tax. The Assyrian army was always the threat.

In 627 BC the city of Babylon a revolt took place. The great Assyrian emperor who had been reigning for the past 50 years died. This was a chance for the Babylonians to revolt against the experience. All of the other nations began to feel like they could revolt in this region and so the Egyptians revolted as well. The land of Judah revolted as well and threw off the Assyrians and became independent for a while. Let's see how this plays out on the video screen.

VIDEO Assyrian Empire taken over by Babylonian Empire (no audio)

We start in 627 BC where the revolt takes place in Babylon. It spread across the old Assyrian Empire and in 612 BC conquers the capital city of Nineveh. By 609 BC this entire region is controlled by the New Babylonian Empire.

SLIDE Map of Babylonian Empire Takeover

You will notice that region that had been controlled by the Assyrians on the edges of the Empire became free nations for a time. The Egyptians as well as those in Judah, for the first time in 100 years, they have independence for the next 17 years. Remember that people want to hold onto that land bridge and control it and so Egypt is the next one to move in and to assert their power. Egypt decides to invade the land of Judah and put a puppet King on the throne. They're going to fight with the Babylonians and the remnants of the Assyrians in the Battle of Carchemish. Let's take a look at the map and see what happens

in 609 BC.

VIDEO Egyptian Empire advances (no audio)

In 609 BC we find Egyptian Empire spreading up the Sinai, up through the land of Judah and along the Fertile Crescent, up to the town of Carchemish Euphrates River.

SLIDE Map of Egyptian Empire advance

The Egyptians were soundly defeated in 605 and the Babylonians then begin marching down through Judah to conquer Judah and Egypt. We see that in this next map.

VIDEO Babylonian Empire advances (no audio)

After the battle of Carchemish the Babylonians march through Judah, conquering everything in their path until they finally get Egypt.

SLIDE Map of Babylonian Empire 597 BC

This movement of one Empire being overtaken by another and a short period of freedom for Judah is what Jeremiah is prophesying about in his book and so in order to understand the book you need to understand is part of history and geography. We begin with the Assyrians who are ruling and then there is some freedom for Judah for 17 years. The Egyptians conquer Judah and put their King on the throne until the Babylonians show up and wipe out the Egyptians. They conquer the land of Judah and install their own King. This land of Judah is caught between battles of the great empires and they go back and forth in terms of how life is lived out for them in this region.

SLIDE Jeremiah begins prophesying in 627 BC

What happened in 627 BC? The Babylonians threw off the Assyrians and when that happened the Jewish people also threw off the Assyrians and gained their freedom. It was a time of great change and Jeremiah was 16 and he felt the call of God to begin preaching throughout the land of Judah to return to their God.

When the Assyrians had invaded the land of Judah the people had begun to worship the Assyrian gods alongside Yahweh, the one true God of Israel. They built altars for the Assyrian gods and they have gone so far as to move the altar of God which King Solomon had built to the side and built altars for the Assyrians

gods in the Temple in Jerusalem. They also neglected the Temple so the plaster was falling off the walls and it was in great disrepair. For 50 years they had misplaced the Law of Moses. They literally couldn't find it and they stopped paying attention to it while they continued to worship the gods of the Assyrians.

If you look on the backside of your map you will see a list of the Kings of Israel. Josiah is listed there and he becomes a King who is seeking after God. He is the one who casts off the Assyrians and he begins rebuilding the Temple and they find the Law of Moses. Jeremiah is five years younger than Josiah and he comes alongside of him to encourage him as the people of Judah begin to return to God. Jeremiah preaches in every town and village that people need to repent and return to God and move away from the gods they had been worshiping.

Jeremiah warned them that if they followed the gods of the other empires than those other empires would come and enslave them. God would not save them unless they were turning to him as their God and so they should turn away from the idols. By serving those other gods the people were building themselves a prison and they would find themselves controlled again by those empires.

Instead they should do justice and take care of the oppressed. Return to your God by loving God with all your heart and soul and strength. This is the basic message of Jeremiah and you can imagine that he was a bit nervous to share this message and he was just 16 years old. We heard these words from the first chapter of Jeremiah in the passage before us today.

SLIDE ***The Lord gave me this message: "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations."***

"O Sovereign Lord," I said, "I can't speak for you! I'm too young!"

The Lord replied, "Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you. And don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I, the Lord, have spoken!" Then the Lord reached out and touched my mouth and said, "Look, I have put my words in your mouth!"

Here is Jeremiah, a 16-year-old boy and God has called him to share the word of the Lord. There is a fire shut up in his bones that is calling him to do this and I can imagine that when he started there were those who looked at him with a patronizing grin and said, "O isn't that cute, that young boy preaching!"

Jeremiah preached with such firing conviction that pretty soon they began paying attention.

In the first passage of Scripture we find a powerful message that God called young people to stand up and boldly proclaim by boldly living in standing up for others. Too often we think as young people, "I can't do that until I get older." We answer like Jeremiah we say, "I'm only a boy. What can I do?"

But God see's something different. God says, "I'm going to call you to do great and wonderful things."

This year our youth and confirmation weekend will happen during this sermon series and I wanted to do that for reason. We are going to pray over each of our young people in two weekends and we are going to put stoles on them and anoint them with oil and invite the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We are going to ask them to go and do bold and courageous things for God. They may believe their parents in that and they may lead the rest of us as a church.

You see when you are young you don't know what you can't do yet. When you are young and you don't know what you can't do or what you are not supposed to do, sometimes you can do things that nobody thinks you can. When I was younger and I began to feel a call to become a pastor I can remember more than one family member and friend saying to me, "Seriously? You want to be a pastor?" I know that some of you still look at me and ask that, but that's okay because everybody needs a few skeptics!

When I was 25 years old I was appointed to my first church as a full-time youth pastor and the focal point of the youth ministry in that church was a traveling musical that would happen every summer. The only problem was that only a few kids who were popular and good singers and actors got main parts and while I enjoy a good musical it had become a very good way of keeping kids out of the youth ministry. I honestly had no idea what I was doing and I was scared and I was green and I went into my first meeting and told them that I had no interest in helping lead a summer musical. It's really pretty amazing I lasted past the first week but I quite honestly didn't care.

I felt like God had called me to be a pastor and work with young people to help them discover their calling and their gifts and to develop the heart of servants. I told them I wanted to see youth ministry that was focused around mission trips and mission projects where we were serving the least and the last

and the lost. I wanted the young people in my care to learn about God and to have a foundation that would last the rest of their lives, not just be about performing for others.

The next week the senior pastor called me into his office and told me that one of his best friends in the church had a daughter who was planning on being the lead in the musical and so I needed to plan a musical or their family was going to leave the church. I brazenly and arrogantly told him that he should probably find another youth pastor and I left his office. I honestly didn't know any better but I wasn't going to build a ministry around performing musicals, especially having heard from some of the young people in the church who had been wounded and treated horribly on music tours from by the church. I want to be clear that music is an important part of what we do and I've seen musical groups in youth ministries to do great things.

The reality is that is not what God called me to do in that moment and so I said it and I made it clear that I felt like God wanted me to change the world. A few people came alongside of me because I think they felt sorry for me, but we plowed ahead and that group encouraged me when I felt discouraged and they were patient with me when I made mistakes. Over the course of the next five years that church sent hundreds of kids on mission trips and into the mission field and kids who would never led anything became leaders. My last summer at that church there were seven different mission teams that went out that summer from the youth group with over 200 kids. I get a kick out of some of them finding me on Facebook and telling me what God is doing in their life today. The reality is that I didn't know any better because I was young and stupid and willing to do whatever God called me to do. That's how it is when you're young.

Timothy is who we are going to study in the next series of sermons and he was only 16 years old when he began pastoring his first church and the apostle Paul was his mentor. Paul says this to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12 and this is what I would say to all of you in this room who are under 25.

SLIDE *12 Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity.*

If you are an older adult like my age and older, our task is to get behind some of these young people and to encourage them. We should fan the flames

and encourage them. We provide scholarships for them to go to seminary. We provide scholarships for the missing our choir. We provide jobs for people like Zack so we can cheer them on and say, "We believe in you. We see what you can do." We get involved in ministry in Guatemala because of several children of one of our church members who are young and enthusiastic and don't know any better but start a medical clinic in the middle of nowhere for people with nothing. No one told them they could do it so they did.

Many of us used to feel that way at some point, back when we were teenagers. Some of you were marching and protesting and standing up for things that you thought were big ideas and important to change the world. Then you grew up when you trade in your tie-dye T-shirts for a suit and tie or for a laptop and a smart phone. You forgot the fire that once burned in your belly.

Let's fan the flames for our young people. Let's encourage them to dream big dreams about what God can do through them.

If you are young and don't let anyone look down on you because you're young. Don't say, "I'm only a girl...I'm only a boy... I can't do anything."

This is what we see in Jeremiah's call story. From the time that he was born he heard God's voice telling him, "I have big dreams for you. You can change the world and history."

So Jeremiah goes out into the world and he begins to preach to the people and what he is preaching begins to irritate them, "If you don't change then I can see what is going to happen in my mind." Prophets were not fortunetellers in the Hebrew culture – except as the future impacted the present. They wanted the people to change now so they told them what would happen in the future if they didn't change.

He says to them, "These are the things that are hurtful to God. You have to stop. You can't keep doing these things. Thus saith the Lord that there is a kingdom in the North (that kingdom would be the Babylonian Empire which was spreading across the Assyrians Empire) that will come and destroy us if we don't turn back to God. If you continue to follow the gods of the Assyrians and the Babylonians then God will let those gods save you, and they are powerless to save you. You will be destroyed if you continue down this path. Return to God. Castaway these evil practices and turn your hearts towards God."

At first the people looked at Jeremiah and thought it was kind of cute, that

this 16 your boy was preaching about Yahweh. Then they began to get irritated and angry. They put Jeremiah in prison and they beat him. They put them in stocks and locked them up. They harassed him and harangued him and told him to "shut up" in no uncertain terms. "We don't want to hear it anymore. We're not interested in your words or in your God."

Then came a day when Jeremiah told them that it was too late. The kingdom from the North was coming because they had stiffened their necks and hardened their hearts to God. They pushed God away and because of that Jeremiah said, "I am telling you that there is no turning back. That kingdom is coming from the north and they will destroy you. Your only hope is to cast yourself on God."

In 587 BC the most cataclysmic event in the entire Old Testament happens. The kingdom of Babylon invaded Judah. They tear down the walls of the city of Jerusalem. They burned down the Temple of God and destroy the houses of the priests. They take the king's sons and the murder them in front of the King. They gouged out the King's eyes so the last site he ever saw was the death of his own children. They then took the King and the leading citizens of Judah that were left alive and they put them in shackles and made the march to Babylon to be slaves. The kingdom of Judah and the nation of Israel was no more.

Jeremiah had been prophesying this for years but the people didn't want to listen. In Jeremiah 19 he goes outside of the Temple courts and he stands there to preach as people are coming out of the Temple where they worshiped the other gods who have been placed on the altars. We read this in verses 14 and 15.

SLIDE ***14 Then Jeremiah returned from Topheth, the garbage dump where he had delivered this message, and he stopped in front of the Temple of the Lord. He said to the people there, 15 "This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: 'I will bring disaster upon this city and its surrounding towns as I promised, because you have stubbornly refused to listen to me.'"***

Pashhur was the priest in charge of the Temple and when he saw Jeremiah preaching these words he told him, "We have told you more than once to shut up because we don't want to hear this anymore." Then he has Jeremiah stripped and beaten and put into stocks at the gate of the temple. Everybody knows Jeremiah because he is now 36 years old and has been preaching for 20 years. His head and

his arms are in stocks and people see him as they come to the Temple. They deride him and tell him, "This is what you get when you open your big mouth Jeremiah. Keep it shut from now on here."

He spent all night in the stocks and the next morning they let them go and he turns to Pashhur and says, "I have one thing to say you. You are going to die in exile and there will be terror-stricken on your heart, because of what is going to happen to this place and you refused to listen." He then leaves and Jeremiah begins to write a Psalm to God.

Jeremiah is interesting because unlike any of the other prophets you get a chance to peer into his heart and hear how he is feeling about sharing his prophetic words. You find that Jeremiah actually wants people to like him. It's not like he doesn't care what people think. It hurts him when people say bad things about him. It hurts him when he cries out and people reject his message. He so wants to live a normal life and yet God has called him to this difficult task. He writes seven different Psalms, also called laments or complaint Psalms. He complains to God in these passages and one of them we heard already today from chapter 20.

SLIDE *O Lord, you misled me, and I allowed myself to be misled. You are stronger than I am, and you overpowered me. Now I am mocked every day; everyone laughs at me. When I speak, the words burst out. "Violence and destruction!" I shout. So these messages from the Lord have made me a household joke.*

Do you feel his agony and frustration? Can you hear that he is tired and worn-out from preaching and he doesn't want to do it anymore? "You promised me that you were going to walk with me God and I feel misled because I don't feel your presence when I'm locked up in the stockade all night long! God, this is not what I got into this thing for. This is not what I thought. I thought you were going to do great things through me and instead the people refuse to listen and they laughed at me. I'm tired."

Do you ever feel tired and weary and what you're doing? I think of people who are nurses or other medical helping professionals who got into their line of work to be the hands and feet of Christ and to help people, but so many of them, after seven or eight years of giving themselves find themselves worn-out and burned out. It's hard.

The average career of a social worker is less than six years before they get burned out trying to help people. School teachers often find themselves burned out, especially those in schools without lots of resources or like this community where the cost of living is high and the pay is often not enough to make ends meet. The average career life of pastors today, especially those who go into ministry right out of college or seminary, is only about four years because they get burned out and tired.

This last week as we saw images of the blasts at the Boston Marathon we were all inspired by those who ran to help without thinking about the fact that there may be more bombs to go off in the middle of the chaos. A number of you shared the picture and quote from Mr. Rogers who was an ordained United Methodist pastor.

SLIDE Mister Rogers quote on scary things

When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.

Those are great words but I also was struck by listening to some of those helpers in the aftermath talk about being overwhelmed and tired and burned out, especially those trauma surgeons that dealt with patient after patient. One of them who had done several amputations that day said in frustration, "I don't want to do this anymore. I'm weary. It makes no sense."

SLIDE Jeremiah background

Two weeks ago on April 4 we remembered the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. King experienced what Jeremiah shares as he began to lead the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks had just refused to give up her seat for white person and Dr. King was in Montgomery, Alabama supporting her. All they wanted was to be able to sit on the bus and not have to give up their seat or made to move because of the color of their skin. Dr. King was pulled over and arrested on a trumped up charge and spent two nights in jail. When he got home it was around midnight and the phone rang and the person on the other end said, "We don't need your stirring up trouble anymore boy. If you're not out of town by tomorrow at midnight then were going to blow up your house and blow up your

car and kill your family."

Then the phone went dead. Dr. King sat there with his cup of coffee he walked over and looked at his newborn baby girl. This was what he bargained for, the fact that she might get hurt because of the work he was doing. This wasn't what he intended when he answered the call of God, people threatening to blow up his house and kill his family. He wrote that night a prayer that he set out loud.

"My dad was a preacher and my grandpa was a preacher. I have always been a Christian, but that night is when I actually found God's presence in my life. It became real to me. Sitting over my cup of coffee I bow down and I prayed out loud, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent his right, but Lord I must confess that I am weak now. I'm faltering and I'm losing my courage.'"

That's what Jeremiah was feeling when he wrote these words in chapter 20. Dr. King was just beginning his ministry and he said that he heard God speak to him that night and God said, ***"I'm with you Martin Luther. I'm with you so don't be afraid. Keep preaching righteousness. Keep preaching justice. I will be with you always, even to the end."***

Of course he would be thrown in jail many more times and there will be many more death threats and ultimately, he was assassinated for the cause of the kingdom of Christ. Jesus said this in the Sermon on the Mount.

SLIDE ***Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and other all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward will be great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

Part of the message of this lament is simply, "Don't give up. Don't give up because God understands that you feel like giving up. Turn to God and find strength in him, but don't give up if God is called you. Keep going and persevere." This is what Jeremiah says in one of the most famous passages from the prophet in the text we read from today.

SLIDE ***But if I say I'll never mention the Lord or speak in his name, his word burns in my heart like a fire. It's like a fire in my bones! I am worn out trying to hold it in! I can't do it!***

This text tells us that Jeremiah is thinking about giving up. But there is

something like a burning fire shut up in my bones. It takes more energy to keep quiet than it does to give myself to preaching this word.

This passage points out to us that each one of us needs some sort of fire burning in our bones. There is something within us that we believe in so strongly that we would be willing to be persecuted for and embarrassed by, willing to be rejected or put in prison because there is something that is so important it is a fire shut up in our bones.

But here is what I know from my own life. I have felt that fire shut up in my bones sometimes, and sometimes I've acted upon it. Sometimes I've been too afraid about what other people might think, or what it would cost me or what it would cost the church if I actually said anything or touch on the subject were preached on this thing or if I went to stand with some group of people or if I got arrested for some cause that I believed in. What would happen?

Then after a while you get used to just going along with the Christian faith which takes in the blessings of God. You just enjoy God's presence and the peace that passes understanding. We focus on God's love and how much he loves us and how His Holy Spirit is living in us. All of these things might be true but we forget that all of these things are for something. We forget that there were supposed to be a fire that is shut up in our bones.

Some of you have felt that and you marched in the 60s and you carried signs or whatever the cause was that you were fighting for. Then you became sophisticated and wealthy and there is no need to fight anymore.

My greatest fear as a pastor is that we will end up with a church that does nice things and helpful things for the community, but we lose the willingness to risk and be courageous and bold speaking to those things that we should stand up for, speaking for those who can't speak for themselves. We will have missed the fire that was meant to be shut up in our bones because we let it go out.

The apostle Paul had a fire within him to share the gospel with everyone that could hear it. He was beaten and put into prison in order to be able to reach the nations with the message that there is a God who loves us and who sent Jesus Christ to live and die for each one of us. When he proclaimed that he was persecuted by the pagans who worshiped a variety of other gods, but he still kept going.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, preached the gospel in the British

Isles inviting people to a faith where their head and their heart would go hand-in-hand. He invited people to a passionate faith but to a social gospel where they were engaged in society's problems and giving themselves to caring for the poor and those in need. He was kicked out of the Anglican churches and not allowed to preach in them even though he was an Anglican priest and so, in his own words, he would, "Go into the streets and light himself on fire and people would come to watch him burn."

There is only one passage in the Bible that we know for sure was written by a woman and it is in Proverbs. There may have been others but this one we know for sure in Proverbs 31. It was composed by a woman and written by her son who was King Lemuel, who said that these were the oracles that his mother taught him. This is the last one of them where she says to her son the King these words.

SLIDE ***8 Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. 9 Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice.***

This was the fire that was meant to be shut up in his bones that the King, given the task of caring for his people. She reminded her son that he had to have his eyes open and his ears be listening to see where it is that God needs you to stand now.

I hear from some of you on a regular basis about a fire that is burning with inside of you and we always try to figure out how to fan the flame. Several weeks ago I got an e-mail from a young person who attends our church who wanted me to know that they had discovered things about human trafficking that bothered them and that should bother us as a church. She learned about people who are so desperate to come to United States for a chance at freedom that they literally sell themselves into slavery. They sign up with the "handler" and those handlers often abuse and mistreat those that they bring into this country.

When they get here the handlers control them and they end up working for sub minimum wages in very difficult and hard jobs. People are willing to pay the handlers to do these jobs and the handlers keep most of the money while they keep the servants as their slaves. This is actually happening not only America but around the world. Many women and children become sex slaves and I read this last week about a man in this community arrested for being involved in a ring of hammers who brought children into this country and then sold pictures and

videos of them on the web, literally forcing these young children into a life of promiscuity and pornography.

These people who thought they were coming to freedom have become sex slaves, afraid they will be turned into the authorities by their handlers and so they submit and they live in these conditions. There are approximately 1.2 million women and children around the world serving as sex slaves against their will because they live in fear of doing anything to stop it from happening anymore.

I saw in this young person's e-mail a woman who had a fire shut up in her bones that she asked what we could do about this and what we should do about this. We have a new team of people in our church who want to look at the social concerns and while some of the areas they are looking at have political overtones and make some of us uncomfortable, they are important issues that have to do with people, many of whom are poor and can't speak for themselves.

I get messages from many of you asking about certain issues and how we are addressing them and why I don't preach about certain things more often. Every once in a while I get a bit defensive and want to point out all the ways that we are doing things, but the reality is that when I get those messages from you I see in you a modern-day Jeremiah. There is a fire shut up in Jeremiah's bones and each one of us sometimes gets a fire in our bones about certain issues and when I take the time to read and listen to the things that many voices are saying I realize that they have a point. We could be doing more as a church in many areas.

Watch out for the people who irritate you. Some of them are modern-day Jeremiahs who are speaking on behalf of God. Back in January I preached a sermon series on marriage, love and sex and during one of the sermons I talked openly about abuse in marriages and how it was one of the leading causes of divorce. I received an e-mail from a young woman in our congregation who wanted to thank me but encourage me to be even more aware about the violence that happens in dating relationships as well as in marriage. He told me that she was a teenage girl who was abused by her boyfriend and she began to think that was what relationships were meant to look like and that's how boys treated girls—they call them names and they control them and they control every moment of their time and then they hurt them. She just thought that is how it was and so she married him at age 20.

It was hell and she finally realized that was not how it was supposed to be.

Now she feels a call to speak up and speak out for those girls who can't speak up for himself. She wanted me to know that 1 in 3 young people experience date abuse every year. 4.8 million American women are physically assaulted by their dates every year. Three women are murdered every single day by somebody that they know. This young woman feels like she is supposed to stand and speak out.

Do you hear Jeremiah? Often times God uses the things from our past which are painful and those become the mechanisms for us to see how we can make a difference for others if we are willing to stand up.

As I read Jeremiah this past week I have realized how often I have given into being a coward. It is easy to be afraid to say things because maybe somebody will leave the church, or maybe somebody won't like me anymore. If that's true for me as your pastor I realize that it has to be true for some of you some of the time as well. You're having a conversation around the dinner table and you know there is something that you believe in and somebody is being very strong against your viewpoint and you don't say anything. You sit quietly and eat supper because you don't want to rock the boat. It's not that you have to be of noxious or throw food at them, but maybe it's a simple matter of saying, "You know, I see that issue differently." It takes courage just to say that but I think there are times where it's appropriate.

Let me wrap up by encouraging you that if you have found that fire in your belly then you need to find it again. Part of it is going on mission trips and seeing people in Guatemala or Africa or Costa Rica or at the Holly House down the road and recognizing that you need to speak up for these people. Maybe it's standing up because you have friends who are gay lesbian and you see him getting beat up by people in the church. I'm a Christian and I am not going to stand for people being mistreated or called names.

Look around and open your eyes and your ears and allow the Holy Spirit to help you find that thing and stand up in this season of your life—to have the courage to stand up and be counted and be heard.

The truth is that Jeremiah was not very effective as a prophet in his day. 2600 years later we are still reading his words and that mean something, but in his day he wasn't effective because people didn't listen to him. Some of us might be called to be modern-day Jeremiah's and irritate people, but more than a thing we are called to influence people. My job as your pastor is not to stand up here

and blast you with my own personal opinions or what I think is God's opinion on certain topics. My task is to try to help you see the world in different ways and shake loose of some of the presuppositions that you may have because we live in La Plata County and we have a certain way of group thinking in this region.

We all should have a taste of Jeremiah's prophetic spirit but we also temper it with what we find in the New Testament when Jesus said, "Love your enemies," or the people who see the world differently than you do. You influence them by loving them and praying for them even when you disagree.

The apostle James says to be, "quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to anger." When you're having that conversation at the dinner table or at a church small group, you can share your piece without having to get angry at someone who sees the world differently than you do—instead you are quick to listen to other people's viewpoints.

And the apostle Paul tells us that we should, "consider others better than ourselves." If we love those that we differ with and if we are quick to listen to their opinions and if we demonstrate humility towards them, but we still have firm convictions, we might just have a chance not only to irritate people but also to influence them to experience the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is my hope and prayer for you—young people be bold and courageous and dream big dreams. Those of us who are older need the fan the flames of our young people and let them lead us with the fire in their bones.

Second, when you're tired and your weary and worn down from doing God's work, you don't give up. God isn't finished with you yet and he will be with you.

Finally, let's together find something and look for those places where God would call us to stand in the gap and speak for people who can't speak for themselves. Let's discover a fire shut up in our bones and then I think we can be fully alive and available to God, becoming a part of Jesus Christ in the world which is transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. That's my hope and prayer for us as a church, that we might be bold, radical and courageous disciples of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.

PRAYER

I would ask you to pray a very simple and short prayer to say, "Here I am Lord, send me... Help me to see the world as you see it... Place a fire in my bones... Give me a passion for standing with, and speaking for, those who can't."

In Jesus' name. Amen.

“A Fire Shut Up in My Bones”

Theme: Faith for Tough Times - The Message of the Prophet Jeremiah

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-9, 20:7-9

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

Meditation Moments

MONDAY, April 22 – Read Jeremiah 1:1-3 - We learn quite a bit about Jeremiah in these first few verses of his book. He was born to a family of priests in Anathoth, a small village near Jerusalem. He probably descended from a priest King Solomon banished to Anathoth for supporting a rival for the throne (1 Kings 2:26). His prophetic ministry spanned about forty years—he spent his life serving God.

- These verses name the three principal kings of Jeremiah's time. In total, the prophet spoke the word of the Lord during the reigns of five kings. Who has been or is influential in your life? How hard would it be to “speak your truth” to the powerful people you know? How good are you at receiving it if other people speak their truth to you?
- Jeremiah's heritage (a priestly family that stood apart from the ruling monarchy) seems to have shaped his ministry. He spoke with firm integrity, unmoved by what Judah's rulers wished he would say. In what ways have your family history and life experiences shaped you? How might God use your unique qualities and experiences?

TUESDAY, April 23 – Read Jeremiah 1:4-18 - Jeremiah, like many others God called, thought himself an unlikely candidate for God's work. He was young, maybe younger than King Josiah (who was only 21 when God called Jeremiah to prophesy). He said he did not know how to speak. God could see what Jeremiah couldn't. God called him a “fortified city,” an “iron pillar,” and said, “Do not be afraid of them.”

- God told Jeremiah he was born to be a prophet (verse 5), and promised to be with him (verses 8 and 18). Though God at times works through our weaknesses, most often he uses our strengths. What are you good at? What do you find joy in doing? How can you let God to shape who you are and what you do to spread the message of God's love?
- Jeremiah thought he couldn't possibly be God's prophet. He wasn't alone. Moses had a speech impediment. Rahab, who helped the Israelites defeat Jericho, was a prostitute. Mary, Jesus' mother, was a young peasant girl. What flaws in yourself do you think disqualify you for God's service? Ask God to show you who you are in his sight.

WEDNESDAY, April 24 – Read Jeremiah 37:11, 38:10 - Jeremiah's enemies falsely accused him of deserting

to the Babylonians. They accurately accused him of preaching that Babylon would conquer Jerusalem. His mission was tough and unpopular, and made him many enemies. King Zedekiah's weakness and wavering were similar to the way Herod dealt with John the Baptist, and Pontius Pilate with Jesus.

- Physical captivity is probably not a major issue for most of us. Other forces, though (e.g. broken relationships, financial struggles, addictions, various fears), may hold us captive and keep us from living our lives fully and with purpose. What's holding you back? How can you open your life to God (even if, like Jeremiah, your bad situation was created by people you can't control), and seek divine help to free you from your prison?
- Are you more like those in 38:1 who wanted to "kill the messenger" who was challenging them on God's behalf, or Ebed-melek, the official who stood up against their plot? Are you willing to hear God's message to you even if it calls you to change your ways?

THURSDAY, April 25 – Read Jeremiah 39:8, 40:6 - Jeremiah repeatedly warned that Babylon would conquer and destroy Jerusalem. It finally happened—Jerusalem fell, with awful destruction. Perhaps understandably, the conquerors treated Jeremiah better than his own people had. But, allowed to go anywhere he chose, he decided to stay with the poor Israelites who were left behind in the ruined city.

- Jeremiah must have felt quite a range of emotions during these events. He wrote that his nation's fate broke his heart (Jeremiah 8:18-22). Yet amid sorrow and ruin, he was set free. How have you learned to find blessings even in the darkest times? Each day share your gratitude for God's presence in good and bad times with someone close to you.
- Sometimes we can see a hard time coming, as Jeremiah did. An illness slowly takes a loved one, or financial problems mount until we face bankruptcy. We may pray over and over—as countless Jews must have prayed for the defeat of the Babylonians. How can dark times deepen your relationship with God rather than destroying it?

FRIDAY, April 26 – Read Jeremiah 42:7, 43:7 - Sad and afraid, the remaining citizens of Judah thought it safe and logical to travel to Babylon's rival Egypt. They sought God's direction through Jeremiah, who (again) offered less popular counsel: stay in Judah, and God will protect you. In spite of the Lord's assurance, the remnant marched off to Egypt, and forced Jeremiah to go with them.

- In times of severe trial, seeking God's voice comes naturally. Obeying what God calls us to do is often a different story, as it was here. How do you listen for God's direction in your life? What are some barriers that keep you either from listening to or obeying God? What steps can you take to break through those barriers?
- Jeremiah waited ten days for the word of the Lord. Why do you believe it sometimes takes time for God's will and purpose to become clear, even if you're listening for it? Can you recall times when your sense of hurry made you give up listening for God? How might your decisions change if you allowed more time to think and listen?

SATURDAY, April 27 – Read Jeremiah 32:1-15 - Many of Jeremiah's messages were painful and unpleasant for the people (and especially the kings) of Judah. But Jeremiah also echoed the rest of the Bible in saying that with God the worst thing is never the last thing. Just before Jerusalem fell, he formally bought a piece of property at God's direction. Though real estate prices were surely very low, his motive was not economic, but prophetic. "This is worth it," he said, "because God promises that 'houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.'"

- Though it may not bring responses as severe as it did to Jeremiah, "speaking the truth in love" is not always easy. Yet honesty and accountability are keys to relationships that help us grow spiritually. Has anyone ever challenged you in a way that offered hope as well as a call to change direction? How can you

seek to ensure that your efforts to hold those you care about accountable ultimately lead to hope rather than despair?

Family Activity: God used who Jeremiah was (strengths and weaknesses) to fulfill God's purpose. Select an age-appropriate television show or movie about a family to watch as a family. Before you view the show, ask everyone to notice ways the family uses their strengths and weaknesses to show love and kindness, serve others, and live Christian values (intended or unintended). (Be sure to include a fun treat!) After the show, identify and discuss these characteristics, words, or events. Use this discussion to lead into identifying your family's strengths and weaknesses. Create a family poster with drawings and words celebrating who you are as a family and display it in your home. Offer your strengths and weaknesses to God in prayer, asking God to use them all for His purpose.