

Scripture - Jeremiah 1:1-10, CEB

¹ These are the words of Jeremiah, Hilkiyah's son, who was one of the priests from Anathoth in the land of Benjamin. ² The Lord's word came to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of Judah's King Josiah, Amon's son, ³ and throughout the rule of Judah's King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, until the fifth month of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah, Josiah's son, when the people of Jerusalem were taken into exile.

⁴ The Lord's word came to me: ⁵ "Before I created you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart; I made you a prophet to the nations."

⁶ "Ah, Lord God," I said, "I don't know how to speak because I'm only a child."

⁷ The Lord responded, "Don't say, 'I'm only a child.' Where I send you, you must go; what I tell you, you must say. ⁸ Don't be afraid of them, because I'm with you to rescue you," declares the Lord.

⁹ Then the Lord stretched out his hand, touched my mouth, and said to me, "I'm putting my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ This very day I appoint you over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant."¹



Sermon

On this Father's Day, many of us arrive with hearts full of gratitude for the fathers and father figures whose voices have shaped our lives. Some carry complicated emotions about absent or imperfect fathers, while others celebrate cherished memories and ongoing relationships. Today also marks a significant transition as we celebrate Deacon Jeanne's years of faithful service on her final Sunday with our congregation. These moments of honoring others often lead us to reflect on our own callings. Consider times when you've faced a big transition – perhaps stepping into a new role that felt beyond your abilities, accepting a responsibility that stretched your comfort zone, or speaking up when you doubted your voice mattered. That inner conversation between "I can't" and "but I must" echoes through today's scripture. Jeremiah's honest hesitation when facing God's call reminds us that even when we feel most inadequate, God sees possibilities we cannot yet imagine, calling us to purposes that last through every season of our lives.

Throughout our "Resurrection People" series, we've explored how early followers of Jesus handled dramatic change through faith. We began with Philip's unexpected trip to

¹ Jeremiah 1:1-10, CEB.

meet the Ethiopian official, showing how God works through disrupted plans. We continued with the Jerusalem Council's struggle to break barriers between Jewish and Gentile believers. We witnessed Paul's radical change from persecutor to proclaimer, showing how completely God can reshape someone's identity and purpose. Today, we step back in time to the prophet Jeremiah, discovering that God's pattern of calling hesitant people existed long before the resurrection. Like those first Christians learning to live with courage amid change, Jeremiah shows us how God's calling continues through every season—providing a perfect conclusion to our series as we honor Deacon Jeanne's ministry and embrace the next chapter of our congregation's journey together.

When Jeremiah protests "I'm only a child," we witness that deeply human moment of facing a challenge beyond what we think we can handle. It reminds me of learning to swim. Think about those first moments at the edge of a pool. Most people don't gracefully dive in and immediately start doing perfect strokes. Instead, there's that moment of standing at the edge, heart racing as you dip your toes in the cool water. "I can't do this," whispers the voice of self-preservation as you look at the deep end.

Good swimming instructors recognize this natural hesitation. That's why they don't just shout instructions from the pool deck. They get in the water with you, one hand supporting your back while you learn to float, guiding your arms through proper motions, staying within reach as you build confidence. "I am with you," they essentially promise with their presence. Your inexperience becomes exactly the place where their skill proves most valuable.

In those early lessons, you might swallow water, feel momentary panic, or need to stand up and catch your breath. But gradually, what seemed impossible becomes natural—not because you suddenly became stronger, but because you trusted the instructor's presence and guidance. This relationship between hesitant swimmer and present teacher mirrors exactly how God responds to Jeremiah's doubt—not by dismissing his real concerns but by addressing them with divine presence and practical support.

Just as learning to swim requires a supportive instructor who enters the water with us, Jeremiah's story shows how God meets us in our uncertainty with divine presence. Let's look more closely at what was happening when Jeremiah received this call.

The year was around 627 BCE during King Josiah's reign in Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to Assyria, and Babylon was becoming a threat on the horizon. Political tension and religious corruption created a perfect storm of crisis. Imagine living with the constant worry of invasion, seeing nearby countries conquered while corrupt leaders offered empty promises.

Jeremiah grew up in Anathoth, a small town just a few miles from Jerusalem, in a family of priests. He was young—possibly a teenager or in his early twenties—when God's call came. This wasn't a casual suggestion but a divine appointment: "Before I created you in the womb I knew you."

This call story opens the longest prophetic book in the Bible, setting the stage for Jeremiah's forty-year ministry. The language is deeply personal, with God using close and familiar terms like "created you" and "knew you," similar to how God carefully created humanity in Genesis.

When Jeremiah objects with "I'm only a child," God responds not by dismissing his concern but by addressing it directly: "Don't say 'I'm only a child.'" Then God promises divine presence and protection in verse 8:

"⁸ Don't be afraid of them, because I'm with you to rescue you," declares the Lord."²

and divine words in verse 9:

"⁹ Then the Lord stretched out his hand, touched my mouth, and said to me, "I'm putting my words in your mouth."³

We see in verse 10 that Jeremiah's mission involves both taking down and building up as we read:

"¹⁰ This very day I appoint you over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant."⁴

This dual purpose appears throughout scripture, from Ecclesiastes' "time to tear down and time to build" to Jesus' ministry of challenging religious systems while establishing God's kingdom.

At its core, this passage reveals how God works through ordinary, hesitant people to accomplish extraordinary purposes, providing everything needed for the task ahead.

From a Methodist perspective, Jeremiah's call story reveals God's prevenient grace—which simply means God acts first, before we do anything. When God says, "Before I created you in the womb I knew you," we see what John Wesley described as God taking the first step, before we're even aware of it. This grace isn't earned by Jeremiah's abilities but freely given by a God who knows us completely.

Particularly important in our Methodist heritage is the balance between God's power and our participation. God doesn't force Jeremiah's agreement but invites his participation while providing everything needed. Wesley described this partnership as "responsible grace"—God starts and equips while we actively respond.

Finally, Jeremiah's task "to dig up and pull down ... to build and plant" reflects the Methodist commitment to both personal holiness and social change—we seek both

² Jeremiah 1:8, CEB.

³ Jeremiah 1:9, CEB.

⁴ Jeremiah 1:10, CEB.

individual heart change and the renewal of communities. This passage reminds us that faith involves both examining what needs changing and building what brings life.

This ancient call story speaks directly into our modern experiences of feeling inadequate. When facing new responsibilities, many of us hear Jeremiah's "I'm only a child" in our own thoughts. Parents bringing home their first child often feel overwhelmed with "I don't know how to do this." People starting new jobs might think, "They'll discover I'm not qualified." Volunteers taking church leadership roles sometimes wonder, "Who am I to make these decisions?" God's response remains the same—not denying our limitations but addressing them with presence and help.

Jeremiah's call also speaks to our search for identity in a culture obsessed with achievement. Social media feeds filled with carefully selected accomplishments can leave us feeling inadequate. Yet God's words—"Before I created you in the womb I knew you"—establish our worth before our first achievement. This changes how we view ourselves and others, seeing value that exists before performance.

The prophet's dual mission to dig up and pull down while also building and planting speaks to our complex relationship with change. Whether facing personal growth, church transition like Deacon Jeanne's departure, or working for justice in society, we recognize that creating something new often requires removing what stands in the way. Parents know this when helping children outgrow unhealthy behaviors. Communities experience it when addressing systemic problems. Workplaces show it when updating outdated processes. In all these contexts, Jeremiah reminds us that both aspects—taking down and building up—are essential parts of God's transformative work.

This passage ultimately invites us to see that our perceived inadequacies might actually be the perfect starting point for God's work in and through our lives—not despite our limitations but precisely through them.

The good news is that God's calling isn't based on our abilities but on God's purpose that comes before our birth. When God told Jeremiah, "Before I created you in the womb I knew you," it revealed a foundational truth that changes how we understand who we are and why we're here. Our worth doesn't come from what we accomplish or how confident we feel, but from being known and chosen by God.

This truth changes our inadequacies from obstacles to opportunities. Just as God touched Jeremiah's mouth—the very place of his perceived weakness—Christ enters our areas of greatest limitation with redemptive power. In 2 Corinthians, Paul celebrates how God's "power is made perfect in weakness," showing how God works not by removing our limitations but by working through them.

God's promise to Jeremiah—"I am with you"—echoes through scripture, culminating in Jesus, whose very name Immanuel means "God with us." This presence changes our understanding of calling. We're never sent alone into challenging circumstances but always accompanied by the One who called us. The same God who walked with

Jeremiah through forty years of difficult prophecy walks with us through career changes, family challenges, church transitions, and justice work.

Perhaps most powerfully, this passage reveals God's vision for both individuals and communities—not just keeping things the same but actively “uprooting” harmful systems and “planting” life-giving alternatives. This divine vision extends beyond personal growth to include social structures and relationships, pointing toward God's ultimate work of making all things new. Our participation in this work, however hesitant or imperfect, becomes part of God's larger story of restoration.

This week, I invite you to consider taking steps to live out Jeremiah's calling in your own life. Here are some ideas.

Notice your “I can't” moments. When you hear yourself saying “I'm not qualified” or “I don't know how,” pause and remember God's response to Jeremiah. Write down one situation where you feel inadequate but might actually be perfectly positioned for God's work.

Create a daily reminder of God's presence. Set an alarm on your phone with the message “I am with you” or place a small stone in your pocket to touch throughout the day, remembering God's promise to be with and rescue you.

Identify one thing that needs “uprooting” and one thing that needs “planting” in your life or community. This might be a harmful habit that needs stopping or a positive practice that needs starting. Take one small action toward each.

These small steps connect us to God's larger purposes, reminding us that transformation happens one day at a time as we respond to God's call.

As we navigate life's transitions—from Deacon Jeanne's departure to our own work and personal journeys—Jeremiah's story reminds us that God's calling includes God's equipping. Like that hesitant swimmer at the pool's edge, we may doubt our ability to stay afloat. But the divine Instructor remains in the water with us, supporting us through every uncertain stroke. Our “I can't” becomes the very place where God demonstrates “I am with you,” transforming our inadequacy into the perfect starting point for God's work in every season of our lives.

Will you pray with me?

God who knows us completely, touch our hesitant lips with your message and our trembling hands with your strength. When we doubt ourselves, remind us of your constant presence that makes all things possible. Amen.⁵

⁵ In crafting today's sermon, I employed AI assistants like Claude and Apple Intelligence, yet the ultimate responsibility for its content rests with me. These tools offered valuable perspectives, but the most influential sermon preparation hinges on biblical study, theological insight, personal reflection, and divine guidance. I see AI as a supportive aid to enrich the sermon process while ensuring my own voice in proclaiming the Word of God.