August 24, 2025

To Spread Your Wings

JEREMIAH 1:4-10 (NRSVUE) *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."

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

9 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.
10 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."

* * *

~Isaiah 40:31 (NRSVUE)

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

The Word of God for the people of God!

These familiar words from Isaiah—words that often are put to music—are not in today's lectionary readings, but the reading from Jeremiah brought them to mind. Why is it that two people with very similar makeups and challenges: mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, medical, ethnicity, gender, socio/economic status… Why will one spread his wings and while the other folds his?

Israel is in Babylonian exile, and in the gentle poetry of Isaiah comes the promise that even in waiting, even in the in-between times, we are renewed. The soaring of eagles is not just for the strong or the accomplished; it's a metaphor of spiritual uplift for all who are willing to trust, to be patient and, with the Spirit of God as the wind beneath our wings, to be lifted on currents beyond our own capabilities. It doesn't erase uncertainty, but it does infuse our striving and our service with resilience.

And then there's Jeremiah, the reluctant prophet. Today we begin a series of seven sermons from the Lectionary readings in Jeremiah. In today's reading, Jeremiah is probably about thirty years old, and King Josiah has recently died. Josiah is remembered for restoring proper worship of God and for his commitment to God's covenant with Israel. Many scholars believe the book of Leviticus came to its present form during Josiah's reform: a resource for training the priesthood in opposition to the fertility cults that were a constant distraction to Israel's faithfulness.

After Josiah's death… three months later a coup to overthrow his successor...

Jehoiakim, assumed the throne. Jehoiakim was a ruthless man, the opposite of his father; contemptuous of the basic duties of national leadership, given to luxurious living and ready to silence any who dared oppose him.

Babylonian forces began military forays into Judah and eventually controlled most of the territory surrounding Jerusalem. This was the context when God reached down from heaven and tapped Jeremiah on the shoulder.

Jeremiah was understandably anxious; how would he be received by Jehoiakim and the temple oligarchy. He saw the task as beyond his abilities, and he compared himself unfavorably to others. Like Moses, he was full of excuses. Moses whined, I stutter; Jeremiah whimpered, "I'm just a boy!" But God had a different vision. God saw greatness where Jeremiah saw weakness; God saw power where Jeremiah saw failure.

God opens the conversation with words that, alonside a few other biblical passages, hint at a concept that's been difficult for us who interpret Scripture, especially since the Middle Ages and the work of John Calvin. In English translations these words seem to indicate predestination:

> ***"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."***

Seems pretty clear. But predestination stands in direct contradiction to free will and to the covenantal nature of every biblical reference to the divine/human relationship. There can be no accountability demanded where there is no choice. Some will say, "Yes, but God knows what we will choose." Well, I'm not God, but in most circumstances I can predict what Jo Lynn will choose, and she can predict my choices. But that's not predestination; that's a quality of intimate relationships; the Psalmist writes "Before a word is on my lips, you know it."

This passage is about God's faithfulness, which includes a vision of possibilities—divine inspiration in the present moment stretching backward into our DNA. God was there at your conception, God was there at your birth, and in every moment of life, God is present in the possibilities of the present that always emerge from the past and lean toward the future.

But I don't believe God determines our DNA, or our life circumstances, nor does God choose presidents or divert bullets. Divine providence operates in a world of unlimited options for human creativity and fallibility. There's a lot of free play in the universe, but God moves through accidents, encounters, families of origin, and human choice holding before us a sacred vision of the highest good for all of us. I believe God speaks to every human in his or her own language, culture, and spirituality: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or even secular spirituality. The question is not God's voice but human comprehension: God's vision is instilled in human DNA. We know what is good and right; but it's not inflicted upon us. We are invited to choose the vision.

Jeremiah holds back, protesting his youth and inexperience, and God presses forward. We think small, God thinks big. When we diminish ourselves, God wants us to spread our wings.

Today's reading celebrates the grace that breaks through every self-imposed barrier and challenges the ways we limit our abilities by overlooking or even denying God's gifts.

So, with the same words spoken to Moses, God says to Jeremiah—and to us, "I am with you." When God calls, it's a partnership—an invitation to tap into the potential of divine-human synergy.

In this sacred conversation, we witness a dialogue not only between God and Jeremiah but between possibility and self-doubt, between divine calling and the primal human fear of inadequacy.

This applies to congregations as well as to persons. What dreams are being stifled by fear in our congregation? Where is our sense of limitation thwarting new possibilities? Alfred North Whitehead said, "Limitations are the womb of possibility."

Within the daily routine of life there are immense possibilities for those who, through spiritual discipline, train their eyes to discern the subtle movements of God and risk their own agency in what Bruce Epperly calls "a holy adventure to heal ourselves and the world."

I identify with Jeremiah; and I suspect all of us part of the time, and part of us all of the time shrink from the magnitude of our calling, convinced that we're defined more by our limitations than by God's promise. The promise is that God is with us. God already has given us more than we need to be and do what we are called to be and do. And God's assurance to Jeremiah: "I am with you," is a reminder that the journey of faith is not totally about self-reliance but about being open to transforming grace. Grace transforms Moses' stammering lips into a mighty voice of hope, and Jeremiah's trembling heart into a vessel of courage. Thanks be to God.

Pray with me.