

August 24, 2025

Rev. Mike Eller

## **“Prophets at the Threshold”**

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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This morning’s sermon I’ve titled “Prophets at the Threshold” and in it I want to look at the calling and ministry of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was an Old Testament prophet who’s prophetic ministry began in the 13th year of king Josiah's reign in Judah, 627 BC, continued through the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BC and concluded with his ministry to the Jewish exiles in Egypt sometime around 580 BC.

So if you’re following the timeline, Jeremiah’s prophetic vision lasted for more than 40 years—decades of standing in the threshold between a world that was dissolving and a new world of hope wanting to be born.

Though not all are called to vocational ministry as a prophet such as Jeremiah, I believe there is a spiritual discipline we can take from his life.

But first, a little about home renovation.

How many of you got sucked into the Fixer Upper craze that started about a decade ago? As for me and my house, we loved the show! Partly because: Who doesn’t like a good home renovation story? But also because before Chip and Joanna Gaines built their empire, they were regulars around the Baylor University campus about the time I was finishing my Master’s degree in Waco, TX. I believe one or both of them were also students there at one point.

The show made them household names overnight and ignited the home design industry. It turned their humble construction and design business into a multi-million-dollar success, and put Waco on the map (for something good this time!).

What we learned from watching Fixer Upper: every breath-taking home renovation goes through a loud, dusty Demo Day. Who doesn’t like a good Demo Day?!

Before new accent pillows can be fluffed and displayed, before fresh candles can be lit and placed on restored mantles, before new coats of paint can be brushed on, all of this is preceded by a day of sledge hammers, power tools, and demolition.

We stay for the final reveal but we watch for Demo Day!

What's fascinating to me is how home designers—at least those worth their salt—can see through all that first needs to be destroyed and pulled down to the new creation that lies on the other side.

So, too, the Hebrew prophet.

This two-fold process of destruction and reconstruction was the assignment to oversee for the newly commissioned prophet Jeremiah.

He was probably a young teenager when he received his call to the ministry. I've seen some say he may have been born the year king Josiah took reign, so that would have made him 13-years-old when he began. Others say he was more like 18-years-old. Regardless, Jeremiah was really young.

By the way, this is a great reminder for our young students about to go back to their school hallways. You can be enlisted for godly purposes at any age.

Jeremiah pleaded, "Lord God! I don't know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

But God doesn't accept that as a valid excuse.

Someone once said that in the Old Testament, there are no volunteers. Prophets were chosen and sent by God. But God enabled them in their inabilities, and maybe precisely because of the fact that they lacked any polished ability to do the work in the first place.

To deepen this call, God tells Jeremiah that this has been in the works since before he was born:

"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."

And when the time was right, God put divine words into the mouth of the hesitant prophet. This is language of commission, of the assurance that this was God's doing. Jeremiah's words would carry divine gravitas. And he would

need it as he stared down the likes of king Nebuchadnezzar and the empires of Assyria and Babylon, which were breathing down their necks.

Today, many modern-day internet trolls give warnings of their own against certain people groups but stand on the outside of judgment, proclaiming their messages of doom from a safe distance behind laptops and social media apps.

True prophets stood in the wake of the destruction that they announced, not preserved and separated from it. They spoke their message *to* the people but also on *behalf of* the people, as one of them.

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet because of how he was deeply and openly affected by God's warning of destruction. And through tears, that was exactly the prophet's message.

In the 2021 movie *Don't Look Up*, the protagonists are modern-day prophets. Only, their message of imminent destruction does little to hold people's attention over other news headlines like celebrity break-ups and talk-show meltdowns.

The threat in this allegory is a comet, which represents our current ecological crisis, including climate change.

After scientists discover the comet plummeting toward earth with the promise of catastrophic force, their task is to rally the people and move them to action. Though, all of their relentless information and warnings are met with apathy.

This is in part because of the counter-voices which are creating their own narrative saying that everything is fine and nothing to be too concerned about. The whole aim of these is to keep the masses from "looking up"; and given the frightening capacity of humanity to placate ourselves with entertainment and meaningless drama, it doesn't take much to keep everyone distracted.

Life could carry on as usual as long as people don't look up.

In Jeremiah's time, false prophets also preached their messages of distraction. They offered the false hope that king Nebuchadnezzar wasn't in fact going to come along and trample them. These prophets put their popularity over their position as truth-tellers in the community, hoping the people wouldn't "look up", so to speak, and would carry on as usual.

Jeremiah saw this false hope as being worse than a distraction, it was a dead end no one wanted to talk about, but was no less real.

Jeremiah's God-given task from the beginning included those six verbs:

to pluck up, to pull down,  
to destroy, to overthrow,  
to build, and to plant.

This wasn't just poetry. This was a job description.

Destruction was going to come. It did no good living in the denial of it. And facing their reality meant that they could move beyond despair to building and planting something new.

With God's words, Jeremiah spoke into this dead end a spiritual opening, a portal of hope which saw them through the destruction, the captivity, and the "scattering" and finally into a place of restoration.

In 2024, writer and speaker, Lynice Pinkard, was invited to speak on a panel called "Spiritual Openings in Dead End Times" at a religious conference. She said:

"The spiritual opening in dead-end times requires a dying to the old hope that we can fix this thing, tinker around the edges and make it go. We are so sophisticated and we are so smart! . . . When people are satisfied with what they get from this world system, there is no incentive for surrender . . . We are not desperate and do not even realize we are in a desperate situation. Resurrection hope requires first that the false hope die."

As people of faith, as people of the resurrection, we stand at the threshold between worlds that are dying away and new ones.

We are to be the sacred ushers in the transition, midwives of these endings, helping to bring about what wants to be born. And doing it with an honest word.

I was thinking this week about how not too many years ago, I had only one, masculine conception of God—God the Father. What I communicated about God to others was always using these male pronouns, evoking male-dominant imagery. In that world, I felt as if I was being faithful to what was true.

It wasn't until I was exposed to the perspectives of feminist theologians and the expansive language of other modern-day prophets, that I realized my vocabulary needed to make room for other metaphors.

When I began to see God as Caring Mother, intimate friend, non-binary Creator, and more, talking about God only as a "He" felt cheap, maybe even sometimes wrong or even violent.

There was a time when I needed to let that old world die away and move into one more life-giving, at least for me.

This doesn't mean that today I don't use male language for God at times—or even slip up when I don't intend to—but I fold it into a new conception of God I feel is more expansive.

Modern-day prophets broke open this new world and helped move me through the process of letting go.

This example may not speak to you.

Perhaps for you it is an old dream that cannot continue, a vision of life that no longer fits. You've worn these like an old, tattered t-shirt that reminds you of former days. There's a nostalgia to holding on, but perhaps at the expense of moving forward. You need a ritual of bringing it to its end.

Maybe there's a relationship that needs to dissolve.

Maybe it's an old conception of church membership that is keeping you from being re-invested and involved.

If it's not necessarily for yourself in this season of life, maybe you are the prophet being called upon to help someone in your community honestly move from destruction into restoration. Grab a sledge hammer and get to work, always with the sensitivity of a weeping prophet. Then be there in the dust to help reassemble, piece by piece.

To close, in just a few short weeks, we will begin a mission study here at PCL, something we'll talk a little more about at the upcoming retreat.

This will be a process of discovering where this church has been in its history, its mission, and where it is wanting and needing to go—to be all that it can be for this community.

As part of this process, we might discover some things that need to dissolve and die away—Because we might find that it no longer serves the new vision of what the Spirit is wanting to do.

This letting go might challenge some of us but doing this kind of work is what it means to be resurrection people, standing between endings and new beginnings, prophets at the threshold between destruction and hope.

I hope you will enter this study with me and the Mission Study Committee with an openness, ready to do that kind of work.

I, for one, am excited to learn more and discover anew the restorative and hopeful ministry this church can continue to do in this community.

May we be ever ready for that prophetic work. Amen.