

## *A Vision of Children*

17<sup>th</sup> Weekend after Pentecost – September 30/October 1, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

*Jeremiah 1:4-12 (NRSV)*

<sup>4</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

<sup>5</sup>“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.”

<sup>6</sup>Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

<sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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.”

<sup>11</sup>The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” <sup>12</sup>Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”

*How do we see our children? Both our own offspring and all the children we have welcomed into the family of Christ? Do we see them as God sees them?*

Whenever we come to subjects like marriage and children, the preachers face a bit of a challenge. What about those who are not married? What about those who do not have children? What message will there be for them in the word that the preacher brings?

#### *A responsibility*

It is pretty easy to understand that all of us have a stake in Christian marriage and, likewise, in children.<sup>1</sup> But when it comes to the children that we welcome into the family of Christ, we not only have a stake but a responsibility.

Pay close attention to the words of the pastors the next time there is a baptism. You’ll see that the entire congregation, speaking for the larger church community and, indeed, the body of Christ, affirms our own participation in the baptismal covenant. We are not spectators, simply observing an infant’s baptism and the parent’s promises. Rather, baptism is an act of community . . . our community. Each time we welcome a child into the family of Christ we are taking on familial responsibilities.

I don’t mean to imply that we supplant the role and responsibilities of the child’s parents. But, our part in the baptismal covenant is not mere sentiment. We have our own part to play in helping each of these children to mature into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. For example, few activities at St. Andrew are more stressful or time-consuming than finding teachers for the children’s Sunday School classes. It is an endless struggle but ought not to be. It is tempting to say that teaching is the parents’ job because the children are theirs. But teaching these children about Jesus and a life lived before God is a responsibility that falls to us all. There ought to be waiting lists filled with adults wanting to teach the children for a few weeks. It is a concrete way to live out the promises we make each time we participate in a baptism.

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<sup>1</sup>If you don’t think we all have a stake in children, you might look forward to a new movie coming out, *Children of Men*. The premise is a world descending into chaos because all women have lost the ability to bear children. Yikes.

But seeing our baptismal responsibilities this way takes some adjustment to our way of thinking. Paul speaks of this reshaping, this transformation, as the renewing of our minds. It is learning to see the world through God's eyes. Last week, we asked whether we see each marriage as a sacred union of a man and a woman into one flesh. Is that really our vision of marriage? This week, we can ask ourselves much the same question. Do we see the children in our midst as God sees them?

### Jeremiah

We know more about Jeremiah and his life than any of the other writing prophets because he tells us much of his own story in his prophetic messages. Jeremiah was from Anathoth, a small town about two miles north of Jerusalem in the lands of the tribe of Benjamin. He prophesied from about 627BC to beyond the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. His ministry began during the reign of King Josiah.

According to the book of Kings, Josiah was the last of the good kings before the fall of Judah to the Babylonians. When Josiah was 26 years old, the high priest Hilkiah found the books of the Law (2 Kings 22). Josiah wept for Judah's abandonment of God (after all, the books had to be found!) and convened the Jews for the reading of the Law. Josiah swept out all the pagan practices (as best he could) and reinstated the observance of the Passover. However, at the age of forty-one, he was killed in battle and succeeded by kings who did evil in God's sight.

Josiah's successors, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, rebelled against Babylonia, to whom Judah was a vassal state. Jeremiah believed that Babylonia was God's instrument of judgment upon Judah and that Judah's kings should accept the 'yoke' of Babylon (Jeremiah 27). He was branded a traitor and was imprisoned. Though a tribal priest himself, Jeremiah would also preach hard words against the temple establishment. Centuries later, Jesus would invoke the words and actions of Jeremiah in his own confrontation with the temple priests (e.g., compare Jeremiah 7:1-15 with Matthew 21:12-17).

Nonetheless, during and after the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah would bring words of comfort and hope, promising a day when Israel would be restored and God's covenant would not be written on tablets of stone but upon his people's hearts (see Jeremiah 30-33). After the burning of Jerusalem, Jeremiah eventually fled to Egypt, going into exile like thousands of other Jews.

To sum up, Jeremiah was the greatest spiritual personality among God's people during a time of great chaos and decline. Though by temperament he was gentle and compassionate, Jeremiah never softened his warnings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. He brought them God's call to stay faithful to God and his law, rather than trust in the outward trappings of the temple system. And he brought them words of comfort about the restoration to come.

### *As God sees children*

Talk about a purpose-driven life. Before Jeremiah was even conceived, God had set him aside to be a prophet, one of those who would carry God's message to the people of God and, in Jeremiah's case, even to the nations.<sup>2</sup>

We don't know how old Jeremiah was when God revealed his choice, but we do know that Jeremiah pleaded his own youth as a reason that God ought to choose someone else. But God would not hear it. Despite Jeremiah's protestations, he was the one. God had chosen him for this long before. God saw in Jeremiah hopes, dreams, and purposes that even Jeremiah could not see.

Is it like this with the children around us? What purposes might God have in mind for them? What hopes and dreams might these girls and boys carry? I'm not speaking of the children's hopes nor even those of their parents, but of God's. The children are God's vessels, created in his image.

You might rightly ask how we could ever really know God's purposes for a child. Jeremiah had no idea of his own calling before God told him. Still, even though we might not know the specifics of what God has in mind for any child, we do know that God entrusts every child to us.

In the words of the UMC's full baptismal liturgy, we promise that "we will surround the children with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others." We also promise that "we will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life eternal."<sup>3</sup>

These are not empty words. They express the Christian view of our responsibilities toward every child in the family of God. They elaborate the words from Deuteronomy (11:18-19), "You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul . . . Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away . . ."

*This is God's vision of the children. Is it ours?*

<sup>2</sup>In his commentary, Patrick Miller points out several aspects of Jeremiah's calling that set him apart from other prophets. First, we are told that he was consecrated, set apart. This was usually reserved for speaking of priests, not prophets. Secondly, Jeremiah was to be a prophet to the nations, encompassing a much broader mission than that given to most prophets. Finally, of course, Jeremiah was called to his work before he was even an embryo! It is also telling that the only biblical book longer than Jeremiah is the book of Psalms.

<sup>3</sup>See p. 33 of the UMC hymnal for the complete baptismal liturgy. It is too lengthy to use each week during our worship services, but it is well worth reading. In fact, a little time spent prowling around the hymnal would be time well spent for us all.

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

September October 1 - 7

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Sunday Jeremiah 13-15; Isaiah 15</b> Jeremiah and the linen loincloth; exile is threatened; This section of Isaiah consists of messages to its neighbors</p>	<p><b>Monday Jeremiah 16-18; Isaiah 16</b> Jeremiah's celibacy; Judah's sin and punishment; the famous story of the potter and the clay</p>
<p><b>Tuesday Jeremiah 19-21; Isaiah 17</b> The broken earthenware jug; Jerusalem will fall to Nebuchadnezzar (Babylonia)</p>	<p><b>Wednesday Jeremiah 22-24; Isaiah 18</b> God calls the people to repentance and promises restoration after exile; the good and bad figs</p>
<p><b>Thursday Jeremiah 25-27; Isaiah 19</b> Jeremiah's prophecies in the temple; the sign of the yoke - notice how the book of Jeremiah is filled with these enacted metaphors</p>	<p><b>Friday Jeremiah 28-30; Isaiah 20</b> Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon - a promise of restoration</p>
<p><b>Saturday</b> A day for reflection and catching up</p>	

