



YOUTH DAY (YOUTH AND CHARACTER)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 26, 2008

Karen Jackson-Weaver, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Associate Dean, Princeton University Graduate School, Princeton, NJ

Lection - Jeremiah 1:4-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 4) Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, (v. 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.” (v. 6) **Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”** (v. 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. (v. 8) Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” (v. 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. (v. 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.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Youth Day is celebrated on an international level in many countries and faith traditions. In the black church, it provides a special opportunity for young people to assume leadership in all facets of the worship service and demonstrate what God has done in their

lives. In most congregations, the youth arrive with their white shirts and black (or navy blue) pants or skirts ready to serve as ushers, greeters, and psalmists. In some churches, a young person even delivers the morning or afternoon message. With an emphasis on character, excellence, achievement and leadership development, Youth Day is a wonderful practice of cultivating and promoting discipleship in action.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

--A Snapshot of Youth Day

Given that so many of our children are struggling and dying, I would like to imagine that the day is fast approaching when the following will be a snapshot of a Youth Day service held every month. You arrive to your sanctuary greeted by a seven year-old and a ten year-old. You are ushered to your seat by an eleven year-old and her thirteen year-old sister. A choir composed of youngsters aged four through ten sing a delightful tune. After the opening selection, the welcome is given by a fiery, well-spoken nine year-old. The rest of the service proceeds with young people reading scripture, proclaiming God's word, and sharing their talents in a myriad of forms within the worship service. What a time. What a time.

God has a great purpose for each life, and it is vital that our children understand that they are an important part of God's family. Each church shows how much it believes in and prioritizes children by how much it contributes of its budget to activities that nurture the character of youths. Our responsibility is to provide them with the support, encouragement, training and character development they need to be the best that they can be. Are we up to the job?

As we celebrate Youth Day with a focus on character, we must help our young people understand the responsibility and obligation they have to God and their ancestors. Failure and mediocrity are not options. We must remind young people of the painful history of the enslavement of our ancestors and their perseverance in the face of adversity, dehumanization and suffering. Our heritage is indeed a legacy of triumph. This scripture reinforces for us that God can and will do mighty things through young people. As adults, we need to embrace our role in relation to what God has pre-destined in our youth since the beginning of time.

How can we help them develop Christian character? By providing them character building blocks. Since 1987, the Josephson Institute of Los Angeles has had as its mission: improve the ethical quality of society by changing personal and organizational decision-making and behavior. The organization has embraced six characteristics which I believe are the significant building blocks for growing youth of character. Character, according to the institute, is shown in those who are caring (which also means compassionate), trustworthy, responsible, respectful, fair, and good citizens (this concerns seeking to make one's community, and the world, a better place—which, at

some point, requires boldness). I would add that we can help our youth fully and properly actualize these characteristics by nurturing them in building a relationship with Christ.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This scripture provides us with the context of the prophet Jeremiah's call and the birth of his ministry. Jeremiah comes from a family of priests who reside in Anathoth. In other words, Jeremiah is reared in a culture where he sees adults who mimic for him caring, trustworthiness, responsibility, respectfulness, fairness, and good citizenship all under the guidance of Yahweh. In this text, we also discover the divine plans God has in store for Jeremiah. Verse 5 tells us that God *knew* Jeremiah before he was even formed in his mother's belly, and that he was *consecrated* before he came out of his mother's womb. The Hebrew word for "know" is *yada*, which means "to know or acknowledge." In this case, it appears to be a designation. "Consecrate" in Hebrew is *qadash*, which means "to be appointed, to be holy, to be sanctified." In other words, because of his character at a young age, God can trust Jeremiah to become even holier and to grow in sanctification as he carries out the work of God. This is significant because God tells Jeremiah that he will be a prophet, not only to Israel, but also a prophet "to the nations." In essence, Jeremiah's ministry will have a global impact. His character will make him responsible to the will of God, which means he will also be a good citizen.

Of course, Jeremiah appeals to God and explains that he "does not know how to speak and he is just a boy." (v. 6) It is likely that Jeremiah thought his youth made him ineligible to perform the job. He probably assumed that he was not seasoned enough in ministry and likely thought that he did not have the knowledge, wisdom or insight for such an important task. Perhaps Jeremiah could have benefited from the advice that Paul gave Timothy when he said, "let no one despise your youth." (1 Timothy 4:12-NRSV) Even young people can have a great impact for God if they have the right character.

Ultimately, the perceptions we have of the limitations of young people, and even those that they likely have of themselves, are not an obstacle for God. In fact, in verses 7-9, God tells Jeremiah he will give him the words to say, as well as instruct Jeremiah where to proclaim his message. But God does not stop there. God puts his hand on Jeremiah's mouth and anoints him to proclaim a prophetic message "over nations and over kingdoms." Verse 10 tells us that God explains to Jeremiah that he is to "tear down and destroy," so that God can do the necessary and important work of rebuilding. God does not mislead Jeremiah into thinking this is easy work. In Jeremiah 1:19, God tells Jeremiah that he will face resistance, but he will not be overcome because our God, the deliverer, is with him.

This text is an affirmation to youth in the body of Christ. Young people have always been an important part of black church culture and the celebration of "Youth Day" comes out of that tradition. After slavery was abolished in the United States, many black churches throughout the country established Sabbath Schools where children and adults would learn to read, write and study scriptures.¹ According to the AME General Conference, it reported operating 2,345 Sunday schools, employing 15,454 teachers (and other officers), and serving over 154, 000 students in 1880.² We have long known the importance not

only of teaching our youth to read and write, but of also teaching them the scripture, and showing them the ways of God, all of which was meant to form youth with character.

Black religious culture emanates from a tradition of developing young people's character and leadership skills. This underscores several important theological truths which have profound implications for the African American community. First, God loves young people and will use them in a mighty way. So we must be their adult "priests" and steer them in the right direction and give them opportunities to use their talents. Second, our children are on loan from God, and it is our responsibility to be good stewards of the gifts we have been given. This means we must make it a priority to foster in them the moral values which emphasize discipleship, leadership and character. It also means developing the intellectual, artistic, and creative gifts within our children so that they will become future leaders.

Finally, we must dare our children to dream and to dream big, all the while knowing, as this text once again so clearly proves, that God can dream a bigger dream for them than they could ever dream for themselves. Age is *not* a factor when God places a call upon your life.

Challenge

Jeremiah had a powerful responsibility to preach a prophetic word at a time when many did not want to hear his truthful proclamations. Like Jeremiah, we must be courageous and ensure that we invest in the future—our young people. Are we doing all that we can for our youth ministries and Sunday school programs? Are we equipping our youngsters with the character and skills they need to thrive in a global economy? Most importantly, are we modeling the kind of Christ-like behavior and character we want our children to emulate? I challenge each of us today to rededicate ourselves to making our greatest asset, our children, our number priority not just on Youth Sunday, but every day.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The Lord speaking in the mind of Jeremiah (v. 5); Jeremiah's words attempting to explain to God that he is not up to the task (v. 6); God's declaration to Jeremiah--the commissioner and the comforter--explains that Jeremiah will have a prophetic ministry with a universal message (vv. 7-10); and

Sights: Verse 9 - the touch of God's hand onto Jeremiah's mouth; Jeremiah plucking up and pulling down, destroying, building and planting.

Notes

1. Higginbotham, Evelyn. Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist church, 1880-1920. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 54.

2. Montgomery, William. *Under their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1994. p. 151.