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### “Speaking”

The title of today’s sermon is “Speaking.” At the end of today’s sermon you might think that an odd title for what I had to say, and you’d be right. Often that is an indication that the preacher’s sermon changed from Tuesday, when Mandi needed the sermon title for the bulletin, until today, when the words are actually delivered. Today, it would be more appropriate if we think together on biblical heroism as we listen to the words of Scripture from the first chapter of Jeremiah:

4 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."

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

We continue our heroic young people of the Bible sermon series this morning and we do so with one who has a bit more name recognition than the two Dean Willimon preached on the past two weeks. Those two humble heroes had all of a few passages of scripture dedicated to their memory. Today we encounter a young hero who has an entire book named after him. Yet the similarities of these heroic young people far outweigh the differences. Two weeks ago we had a nameless servant girl who brought the disciple Peter to his knees before he could stand up and be the Church’s foundation. Last week young Lucky, young Eutychus, fell to his death out of a second story window during one of Paul’s longish sermons in the book of Acts, only to have the Apostle resurrect him from the dead and keep on preaching. By now, you may be picking up the theme that heroes in the Bible look, act, and operate very differently from those we call heroic in our own lives. In the Bible it’s almost as if God relishes choosing some out of sorts, pathetic no name sleep deprived young person to speak a prophetic word to the church, be born again by God’s word, to be given his own book, appointed the role of prophet.

We open this book of the Bible, layered in a section of Biblical books called the prophets, and we begin to read, and right off the bat we wonder how in the world the book could be named after someone like this? The first thing that we learn is that God speaks to Jeremiah. God speaks. Jeremiah responds. God speaks. They are having a conversation and it is a rather strange conversation, it doesn’t sound the least bit heroic.

We've been hearing in the news in speech after speech all week long how heroes are go-getters, they are decisive, gutsy, action-oriented. We think of heroes as self-made, self-directed, whether in the boardroom, the halls of parliament, or the classroom. We admire heroic performances like that of young Michael Phelps, in the pool since he was a year old, daily morning and evening workouts, nineteen years of sweat, toil, and competition, and now a nine time Olympic medallist. A hero in the Greek tradition of guts, speed, strength, and an iron will.

Yet the first thing we discover about Jeremiah is that he is none of the above. In contrast to the confident, self-assured, decisive, leaders of our world, Jeremiah doesn't see himself as having much of anything, much less heroic qualities. Jeremiah has a self-esteem problem.

He has no confidence, doesn't believe he is good at anything; he was just sitting out there in the pews, maybe wondering what in the world he was going to do with his life, when all of a sudden, God starts to speak. "Jeremiah, I formed you, I've know you all your life, and you are going to speak my word to the nations."

Jeremiah, understandably, mounts a protest, "he says look, I'm only a freshman. I haven't taken Political Science yet. Maybe you ought to choose someone else to speak to the nations. Besides that, I'm afraid," Jeremiah says, "I don't do well when I open my mouth, people won't take me seriously." God says, "shut-up and listen, I don't care about any of that. You go, open your mouth, I'll give you the words, you speak them."

I came across a list of America's greatest phobias the other day. Reflecting on my own fears, I expected to see things like: the fear of eating too many vegetables, having to buy new shoes, big aggressive slobbery dogs, who don't know that they are big, wet, and slobbery, none of which made the cut. Near the top were, aviataophobia the fear of flying. Odontophobia, the fear of dentists, and at the very top, for something like the 25<sup>th</sup> year in a row, was glossophobia, the fear of public speaking.

Jeremiah is like a lot of us; he's a gossophobe. The God of the Bible doesn't have this fear at all. The Bible tells of a God who is speaking, acting, calling, intruding on people's lives when they least expect it. We know very little about Jeremiah. As far as we can tell he had never prayed to be a prophet, never wanted the job, never wanted God to ask him to do anything. All we know about Jeremiah is that he is young, shy, and insecure, exactly the kind of person God likes to get a hold of. And what's more, God says to Jeremiah's insecurity, "don't worry about. You just go, show up, you'll speak my words when I give them to you."

All this is to say that Jeremiah is a proto-type biblical hero. God grabs this scrawny little kid and despite his protests, God sends Jeremiah out, not to other people like him, other youth, but to the nations and kingdoms of the world. Like all the great biblical prophets, Jeremiah goes forth bumbling out God's word on behalf of the poor and the oppressed, calling for Israel to forsake it's selfish ways, to stop replacing allegiance to God with trust in nationalism, militarism, and economic progress. Can you imagine, young insecure Jeremiah wandering around Constitution Avenue up in DC, his cries echoing down the corridors of power, stuttering out words of God's justice, calling the politicians to account. He wouldn't even get a headline, no microphones or television cameras, no convention halls packed with people would be there.

But God is no media hawk. God wants faithfulness rather than press clippings. In Jeremiah, God has found someone he can use, someone savvy enough to know that he

is not the master of his own destiny and wise enough to allow God's word, God's will, God's dreams, to be more important than his own.

This past summer I received a phone call from a fellow pastor in Atlanta. "I want to talk to you about the undergrad you recommended for our ministerial internship. She's really not mature enough for this church," he said. "Not mature enough, oh gosh, what has she done?" "We're a large downtown church, we have a lot of important people who come here, and quite honestly she's making our folks feel uncomfortable. I told her that her job this summer was to sit, listen, learn, watch how we do things, but she's constantly asking questions, in staff meetings, in Sunday school, to everybody who walks in the office, she wants to know why we don't expand our homeless ministry. She says we should try to influence Georgia state policy. She wants to know why we don't pray more. She says we need to read scripture in worship. I just don't think she'll fit in as a pastor."

I said, "Are you nuts? Have you ever read Jeremiah? We should all be so fortunate to have some twenty year old who has the courage to speak God's word to us, to push and pester us to be better Christians. It sounds like your church ought to give her a job."

This student in Atlanta, she's like a lot of people we know. She's not filled with self-confidence. She's not excessively brilliant. The admissions office isn't going to feature her in the next alumni magazine. In other words, she's a lot like most of us everyday disciples. Just stumbling around, trying to be faithful, exactly the sort of people God can use to speak God's word.

A year and a half ago, soon after the war in Iraq began, a recent Duke graduate walked into the back of the National Cathedral up in DC. He's a bit of an awkward guy, like some Duke students he was more comfortable conversing with Physics formulas than real human beings. He got involved in campus ministry while he was here at Duke, and with other students and staff, he really started to study the scriptures, and there heard the stories of Jesus in a new way. On this particular day, our gangly soft-spoken physics major strode into the back of that grand cathedral that, in those recent months, had been acting rather like a soothing pet-pulpit of mainstream American culture.

Throughout most of church history when Christians felt utterly compelled to go to war, they went with a sense of sadness, a sense of utter horror, a belief that their own salvation may well be at stake in the taking of another's life, but on that morning in DC there was none of that hesitancy, only prayers for victory and triumph. In the midst of these prayers our physicist, in the back of the church, on his knees, opened his mouth and merely started to pray, granted, rather loudly, the words of Jesus: "Father forgive us for we know not what we do. Lord, teach us to love and pray for our enemies. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." And all of a sudden he was jerked up off his knees, handcuffs thrown on his wrists, put on a bus, and tossed in jail. All this fuss for an awkward young Duke graduate who got a "D" in public speaking, who was merely praying the words of Jesus in a church?

He sounds like the kind of heroic person we might encounter in the Bible, or in the pew next to you, or walking across campus, or in the office beside yours, or in the mirror for that matter.

If you've come to church this morning and everything in your life is going great. If you are satisfied and fulfilled and you've come to sprinkle a little spiritual icing on top of an already complete life. Well, this scripture may not make much sense to you. On

the other hand, if you're out there feeling a little lonely, feeling awkward and insecure, struggling to find a voice in the world, feeling anything but heroic. Look out! You're just the kind of person that God may call next. Amen.