

Today we are beginning a series on the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. It was not easy to be Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived and spoke out during a time when the people of God were going through some serious judgment against them. In 721 bc, Israel, the people chosen by Yahweh God to be God's faithful people, was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. Not all of Israel was conquered, the Southern kingdom, called Judah survived this conquest.

A little over a hundred years passed and the Assyrian power began to wane and another empire came to power. This rising empire was Babylonia under the direction of Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians rose to power around 600 bc. And threatened the existence of Judah. Earlier, Judah had been under the kingship of Josiah who was praised as a very good and faithful king. But when he died and his sons took over, Judah became weak and a vassal of the Babylonians. Eventually in 586 bc, the Babylonians conquered Judah.

Jeremiah lived to see all of this happen. Jeremiah saw firsthand the destruction and conquest of his country whose people thought would be protected by Yahweh God. Jeremiah used the image of a good marriage gone bad to describe how Judah had once been faithful to God but that now they were faithless. Jeremiah had the difficult task of telling God's chosen people that judgment would come upon them for their sins of serving other gods, worshipping falsely, and being greedy to others.

As we will hear in this reading, becoming a prophet who would be responsible for shouting out bad news to people who did not want to hear it was not what Jeremiah wanted for his life.

Read Jeremiah 1: 1-10

Reading these two call stories this morning, the call of Jeremiah and the call of Gideon, reminds us that the people that God chooses are not the people who have it all together. In fact, both of these people, Gideon and Jeremiah, tell God that they are not equipped to be leaders. They make excuses about why they can't be the leaders that God wants them to be. They make excuses telling God why God will fail with them as leaders. But even with all of their reservations, God still calls them as leaders.

I want to share with you the story of Tracy Baldyga. Tracy is 32 years old and has suffered with asthma since she was young. But the asthma never stopped her love of sports. She never felt like she could be a runner but she participated in other sports throughout school.

One time when she was in her 20s she went hiking and met at the summit of the mountain an older gentleman. They talked about several things and then he told her that he was a runner and that to complete a race you really have to push yourself. That really seemed to hit home with Tracy. Because one year earlier she had tried to take her life through suicide.

Tracy confesses that in the mid 90s she had been diagnosed bi-polar and obsessive compulsive. In the next 8 years she had been in psychiatric care 8 times and had tried several medications that did not seem to work. In Tracy's words, "I am sitting on this mountain at 29 years of age and feel as though my life is gone."

In a few short years Tracy had gone from a straight A student and stellar athlete to the end of her road. But through that chance meeting on that mountain she decided to take up running again. She completed a 50K race and was hooked on racing.

Tracy's second race became much more than a race, however. She arrived in Houston, TX a day before the race to scout out the course and check for any plants which might cause her problems with her asthma. She found Houston to be very hot and humid so she prepared herself for this type of weather.

When she awoke the next morning, however, she found rain coming down harder than she had ever encountered rain before. Listen as Tracy describes what happened next:

“I just wanted to go home. How could I run a 50 mile race if I didn’t even want to get out of the car? I was already formulating my excuse. At the start of the race I was a combination of nerves and cold. I wasn’t feeling very strong and I finished the first lap 15 minutes slower than I hoped. I was so worried. I felt like an ant on the trail and I did not know why I was there or how I could finish. I was scared I would be a DNF and people would laugh at me. I was having more self-doubts than I had ever had before.”

“As I ran the course, I felt every emotion possible, or so it seemed. I spent a lot of time pondering my past. I thought a great deal about people who had entered into my life and what they taught me. The good and the bad, the triumphs and the tragedies, all of the tears and the pain and the laughter. I was overcome with the guilt of the attempted suicide. Snapshots of life just flashed before me.”

But then Tracy says that she was brought back to the moment as she realized the excruciating pain that she was under. Her feet were feeling raw beneath her when the worse thing started to happen. She began to have an asthma attack.

“An excuse,” she thought to herself. “Now she would have an excuse to quit.” She could be a DNF and just say that her asthma overcame her. No one would blame her and they would probably say that she did the right thing. But then in a moment of incredible clarity she realized that every time in her life when she encountered fear she had an asthma attack.

“If I hear people argue in line at the grocery store, I have an asthma attack. If someone disagrees with me in such a way that I feel stupid, I have an asthma attack. Was this race just another example of having an asthma attack when she faced fear of failing? It had always been easier to just quit.”

Tracy stood there for about 15 minutes. She was near her car at that point and she pondered whether to get in that car and leave. No one there knew her. She was alone in her decision. She was, in her own words, “a total loser.” But this time, rather than allowing her fears overcome her; she used them to keep going. She finished the race and hasn’t looked back since.

There are a lot of good reasons to turn down God when we feel God is calling us to do something in our life. I am too young. I am too old. I am too busy. I am too lazy. I have messed up so badly in the past there is no way I can ever change. I will fail. I have failed before so I will probably fail again. The task is too great. I am too weak. We have lots of excuses and God has heard them all before.

But maybe the story of Gideon and Jeremiah and Tracy has something to teach us. Maybe it is time we face our fears. And rather than allowing those fears to keep us from saying “yes” to God we allow those fears to motivate us to accept challenges from God.

Maybe there is more inside of us that God has given us than we know. Maybe we are stronger than we think.

Maybe God is stronger than we think.

Maybe it is about time we said, “Here I am Lord, send me.” AMEN.

-Jamison, Neal, "Running Through the Wall, Personal Encounters with the Ultramarathon, Breakaway Books, 2003, p. 58-64

-Text: Judges 6: 11-18; Jeremiah 1: 1-10

-Given: 10/10/10 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)