

Sermon: I Am Only a Child

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, January 30, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I once met the fame Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, who gave a most memorable speech at the convocation address to the graduating class of 2006 at Knox College, Toronto. True to the message contained in his then recently published book, “The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity”, Professor Hall painted a bleak picture of Christian ministry in the 21st century, in the Canadian context.

He touched on the long established narrative of overall decline in church attendance. He lamented on the loss of recognition and prestige that clergy used to enjoyed not too long ago. He shocked the graduating seminarians with unambiguous statements that ‘they have all made a bad career choice’, that they can forget about any prospect of job security; they can throw away any hope of a decent pension, and there may not even be a church left standing when all is said and done.

However, unlike his book which does end on a hopeful note on the sovereignty of God, Professor Hall, in that convocation speech, never let up. It was doom and gloom, and more gloom. It wasn’t my graduation that day; I was only in my second year of seminary study at the time, but I felt terrible for those schoolmates of mine, who were just livid afterwards. Imagine those same future ministers, now set loose to face that same bleak future in their call to ministry, armed with the Bad News of Hall, instead of the Good New of Christ.

I wondered if any of them had heeded Douglas John Hall’s warning and turned back. I wondered if any of them would give up all together, and would then find greener pastures elsewhere. Anyone who came out of that convocation speech, would have no way of pleading ignorance of the challenges ahead. They were all warned! We are all warned!

No one warned Jeremiah during his call to the prophetic ministry. The lectionary text in Jeremiah 1:4-10 takes us to that call, when God appointed Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations. No senior prophets were at the scene offering vocational advice. No one told him the tears and heartbreak ahead, certainly not God. In fact, God seems to delight in shutting down any

semblance of objection from those whom God calls. *“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child”*, protested the prophet in Jeremiah 1:6. To such a meek objection, the Lord replied, *“Do not say, ‘I am only a child’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.”* (v.7)

The objection that Jeremiah offered was similar to that of Moses in Exodus 4:10, *“O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”* The response that God offered was also similar, in verse 11-12, *“Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.”*

However, unlike Moses who would go on to do God’s great work, and eventually delivered the Israelites from the clutches of the Egyptian Pharaoh, from the bondage of slavery, Jeremiah’s words would fall on deaf ears.

Once it became clear to the prophets that his admonitions would have no affect on the people’s behaviour, Jeremiah proclaimed consistently that the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem. The people of Judah should respond not by forming alliances with weak and untrustworthy allies, but by submitting to the Babylonian rule, just to stay alive. Jeremiah even addressed those who had been forcibly exiled to the city of Babylon, that there were ‘to seek the welfare of the city’ (v.29:7). Those in exile should ‘build houses and live in the’ (v.29:5). For those who were fortunate enough to stay behind (or unfortunate depending on one’s point of view), the prophet bought, symbolically, some plots of land, and buried the deed of sale in the ground, so “houses and field and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (v.32:15).

Prophetic ministry, by and large, is not in the business of foretelling future. Prophets are sent by God with a clear purpose of averting God’s planned punishment, with symbolic actions and oracles of judgements, so people could and would return to the righteous path. Yet, when we look at Jeremiah’s life as the whole, we really have no choice but to conclude that his was a complete failure, his ministry ended in complete disaster—of hearts not moved, lives not turned, and exile not averted.

Had the prophet being warned, right from the beginning, would he have continued? Would he be so willing a participant, appointed by God

over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to over throw, to build and to plant? I think not!

In fact, the prophet took his objection and lament to a new high. Instead of lamenting over the fate Jerusalem, over the fate of the people of God, Jeremiah lamented over his own fate in chapter 15. The prophet had enough! He gave it to God with no holds barred; he asked God to smite his opponents; he blamed God for his suffering; he even complained about his lack of social life as the prophet reminds God that he's never once had fun, because of this ridiculous calling.

Then he ended his prayer of lament with this shocking description of God, "*Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail*". (Jeremiah 15:18) There is no amen at the end of that prayer. The way it abruptly ends suggest to me that the prophet has more to say, but simply won't say it.

How do we deal the this lamenting and this most reluctant prophet? The answer according to David L. Petersen, is to place lament in the context of worship. According to Petersen, in *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction*, "Laments derive from the language of ancient worship. They reflect what an individual or the people would have spoken in worship, often at a temple. There is strong evidence that, during the lament ceremony, a priest would have offered an oracle affirming that the worshiper had been heard and that his or her concerns were being addressed." (p.108).

Lament is not simply a way to complain; it involves a petition for help, it also involves the expression of confidence that God has indeed heard the cry, and would be addressing it. God hears our laments, God even engages in them, but God does not always offer an immediate response to our cries, to our laments.

Once I was helping a parishioner with his lament. It took awhile for him to trust me enough to spell out what his issue with God was. He simply cannot see God as love, as loving enough to care for him. So that parishioner soldiered on in a loveless faith, in fearful obedience to the Lord's commandments. His knowledge of the Scripture superb, his devotion to the church unquestionable, but because he did not feel loved, so he gives no love, not to God nor to others. It is harsh way to live a life of loveless faith.

I tried to listen to him, to give him that time and space to lament. I tried to share with him my own journey struggling with God, and how I

came to see and understand the passage of 1 Corinthians 13, when the Apostle Paul speaks of love as patient, as kind, as not insisting on its own way. Love as not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, but as rejoicing in the truth. I tried to reassure him that the love of God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

But I can't really say I have solved his issue with God. Laments such as his, took a long time to incubate and even longer time to gestate. No amount of words from a young and inexperienced pastor was ever going to be enough to help him through. I am only a child, and God was not around to answer us.

But I love him, enough to hear him, enough to spend time with him and to pray for him. Enough to trust in the Lord, for we know only in part, and we speak only in part. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but will one day see God face to face. That surely is enough.

I do not want to end the sermon without acknowledging that God had indeed heard and responded to Jeremiah's lament. The prophet would not get to see it, but he got to prophesy it, as in Jeremiah 31:31-34,

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.