

Sermon – June 25, 2023
Pastor Dan Hollis
Jeremiah 20:7-13

Sometimes, God needs you to give bad news. The angel Gabriel had it easy—he got to bring “good tidings of great joy... for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” But so often when God places a nugget of prophecy on the heart of a human like us, it has to be bad news. And for good reason—if all God had to tell us was *good* news, what good would it be? Good news doesn’t get anyone to change anything. Good news doesn’t warn. But *bad* news... can make all the difference.

Paul Revere went on his mythic midnight ride to warn the American colonists that the redcoats were coming. If he—people like him—hadn’t gotten the word out, no-one would have been ready to *defend* their freedom. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke the harsh truths of injustice and inequality in the hopes that society would *change* to a more just and righteous place for *all* people. And even as a teenager, Greta Thunberg took bad news about the climate that we all needed to hear... from Swedish Parliament to the United Nations itself. Sometimes we need to hear bad news, because bad news makes for good change.

Now plenty of people found King’s messages a hard pill to swallow, and in the end they killed him for it. And today, there are many who are openly hostile to Thunberg for the crime of trying to help save the planet.

In the Bible, the prophet Jeremiah had to warn the people of God that their kingdom would fall, in large part due to their actions and inaction. And the people... well, they threw him into the bottom of a well for his trouble. It’s one of the earlier examples of “shoot the messenger.” Or rather, “lower the messenger into an empty cistern with ropes and then leave him there so he’ll sink into the mud and starve.”

Nobody likes a party pooper, and everybody *dislikes* the bearer of bad news. And yet God keeps asking us to *be* that. Living a life of faith, living with a heart attuned to God’s and the needs of the people, it opens our eyes to things that are going wrong around us. And opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit makes us fertile ground for all manner of prodding and stirring toward the work of the good. And sometimes... good work requires bad news.

Sometimes you have to rip off the Band-Aid. Sometimes you have to reveal to your cat that it’s time to go to the vet.

I saw the cutest video the other day of this little toddler all dressed up to go to the park, when his mom had to tell him it was raining and they couldn’t go. And it was like all the light had gone out of the world. This little guy just took off his jacket, and tossed it on the ground. He paced across the carpet, and slowly, dejectedly took his cap off and let it fall to the floor. And head down, he walked over to the glass door and put his palms up against

it, looking for all the world like an old New Englander who just found out the mill was closing. Nobody likes to get bad news.

Our Scripture reading today comes from a man who's *tired* that people keep trying to shoot the messenger. God gave Jeremiah eyes to see what was wrong in the world, and what needed to be *done* to avert catastrophe. And God lit a fire in Jeremiah's heart that would not go out: a fire from within that spurred him to *do* something about what he could see clearly. To *be* the bearer of bad tidings to people who needed to hear them, come what may. And because of his wisdom and courage, some mocked him, some shunned him, some undermined him, and some sought to do him harm.

We can learn a lot from this passage.

We can learn from Jeremiah's steadfastness that when God places something on our hearts we should bear it proudly without regard for what others might do to us or say against us. *And* we can learn from the bad reaction people had to Jeremiah... so that *we* might have *better*, kinder, more charitable reactions to *others* when *they* bear bad news that *we* don't want to hear. And we can draw *consolation* from what Jeremiah knew best: that **when the Lord sends you to bear bad news, you do not walk alone.**

Now, there are plenty of people out there bearing bad news that *doesn't* come from God, and there are plenty of people using "don't shoot the messenger" as a justification to say and do truly awful things, even in the name of God. So I'm not here to say as a blanket statement that, if there's something on your heart you *think* comes from God you should immediately march forth and shove it down everyone's throats, and claim divine authority because, well, people are *mad* at me so I *must* be on the right track.

Sometimes push-back is deserved, and there are plenty of things in this world worth pushing back *against*.

Plenty of "bad news" out there has *no* basis in the God we see revealed through Jesus Christ. So it's the work of a life of faith to *discern* whether what's on your heart comes from God or from some other source, *before* you follow the path of Jeremiah.

And hey, I'm thirty-three years old, the same age Jesus was when he was spit on by a mob and put to death by the government, because they took his "good news" so badly... and *I* haven't even gotten *one* death threat. And I've worked with pastors before—even in this church—who've gotten death threats over things they've said and done in their ministries. Death threats from so-called Christians, no less. So either I'm not taking enough risks in the name of God, or my reach just isn't big enough.

Either way, I can't give you a hard-and-fast breakdown on... *this* is something God wants you to shout from the rooftops, and *this* is something you should probably take back

to the drawing board. That kind of discernment is far more complex and takes far more time, effort, and prayer, than a simple flowchart could provide.

No, but something I do think is valuable to draw from this Scripture are the words Jeremiah uses to comfort himself.

He's not in the bottom of the well yet, but I can imagine him saying the very same things down *there* as he waited for his rescue to come.

"For I hear many whispering: 'Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!' All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. 'Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him.' But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten."

The bottom line is, **when God sends you out to be the bearer of bad news, God does not send you out alone.** God walks with you, your shield at your side, to deliver you from the slings and arrows that rain down upon you for the truth you bring. If God *wants* you to take a risk to stand up for something, to speak out against an injustice, to warn of consequence, to protect the needy from the hands of evildoers... God will not abandon you in the process.

God's not the "Charlie" of "Charlie's Angels," the voice on the speaker telling the girls their dangerous mission and then waiting patiently for them to get *themselves* out of whatever scrape they end up in. God's not an *armchair* general sending soldiers to fight and die in some trench or village across the world for oil or a line on a piece of paper.

God doesn't push you out of a plane without a parachute—if anything, God's one of those skydiving instructors who ties the two of you together in one harness so that when you jump out of the plane, *God's* the one that pulls the parachute cord when the time is right.

I've never *sky-dived* either. Never sky-dived, never got a death threat—why do you people even listen to me?

This passage is comfort to all those facing pushback for bearing a message from God. To all of you who feel God's urge to stand up, stand against, and open someone's eyes... and who are persecuted, mocked, attacked, punished for taking the risk. You do not bear those blows alone.

Paul Revere had a whole militia beside him. When young Greta Thunberg addressed the UN Climate Change Conference, with words that made her a target of countless angry people much older than her, *millions* of students took to the streets alongside her.

And when Martin Luther King was assassinated for preaching justice and equality, God was there to welcome him home.

Even if you are just one voice crying out in the wilderness, God is there, your strong right hand, your shield, your “dread warrior.” In the end, come what may, God’s will will out. If the message on your heart is truly of God, if your words and actions are righteous and driven by the Holy Spirit, your persecutors will stumble. Your message will prevail, for it is not just you bearing that news, good or bad. You bear it with God at your side.

So have courage, messengers. Your efforts are not in vain, and they are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.