

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
28 April 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Moving our World from I-llness to WE-llness”

Fifth sermon in the Easter series, *“The World Made Well...”*

Jeremiah 1:1-10

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment. This particular manuscript is a very rough guide; only about half of this material was preached in the moment, but I felt it could be helpful to leave it all in for those who want a deeper dive.

Jeremiah’s life spanned one of the most difficult, divisive, and devastating periods in Hebrew history. He lived in the years leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, and around the same time of the Babylonian exiles (or exiles). Everything that could go wrong did go wrong.¹

And—the prophet Jeremiah didn’t ask to be born at that time, in that place, and he certainly did not ask to be the mouthpiece or spokesperson for God.

Often when we hear the word prophet, we think that means someone who is 1) able to predict the future, or 2) a passionate advocate for justice, or 3) someone who announces doom and gloom. Yet, in the Old Testament/Hebrew

Scriptures, prophets are simply messengers and spokespersons for God. Prophets are primarily concerned with the relationship between God and God’s people in a particular time and circumstance.² Let me say that again: Prophets don’t predict the future; they are concerned about what’s happening in the present, and how their present will affect their future (and their relationship with God if they don’t change their ways).

So, if the words of prophets feel urgent or judging, it’s because they are. So much is at stake and every action, every word, every life matters.

First, a bit of context about Jeremiah. He comes from a priestly family, the son of Hilkiah. Jeremiah’s family stood in the tradition of the priest Abiathar, which probably

¹ Eugene Peterson, “Jeremiah Introduction,” *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress) 2002, pg 1020.

² John M. Bracke, *Westminster Bible Companion: Jeremiah 1-29* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2000, commentary, pg 1.

doesn't mean anything to you, I know. But here is what you need to know: this priestly line had been exiled to a town called Anathoth by King Solomon at the beginning of his reign. When Solomon's father, David, had been king, there were two priests in Jerusalem. Abiathar was a priest connected to Israel's earlier era, when it was organized by tribes and not monarchy. He represented a priestly tradition, rooted in the exodus, that was concerned about oppression and injustice and was suspicious about monarchy. The other priest, Zadok, had more direct connections with the political and religious establishment of Jerusalem during David's day. Zadok (and the tradition of priests that followed) strongly supported the monarchy.³

Perhaps it's important here to remind you that the role of priests was to hold kings accountable to God's purposes. It was a system of checks and balances. With these two lines of priests, one supporting the monarchy and system of kings more than another, it's easier to see why Solomon chose to keep Zadok and his priestly line

around, while banishing Abiathar.

So Jeremiah telling us, as he writes his story, right off the bat that he's the son of Hilkiah (who is of the Abiathar priests who were banished to the southern Kingdom, Judah, and specifically to the town of Anathoth within the tribe of Benjamin)—is like Jeremiah giving us a huge flashing neon sign right at the beginning of his writing that says, *"I'm going to have major issues with the Davidic kings of Jerusalem and the religious establishment; I'm going to call out the religious leaders that have gotten too close to the political leaders and are focusing more on power than on people, more on gold than on God."*

So Jeremiah, by virtue of his birth and his DNA, is a bit of a rebel rouser when it comes to the power structures of the day. He doesn't really know this yet, as a young boy, but it is in his bones to not just be a "yes man" to whatever kings say.

Beyond his family lineage, Jeremiah's context also includes the TIME in which he was born. Which was one of the most

³ Bracke, pgs 12-13.

tumultuous times in Israel's history. Lucky Jeremiah. In King Josiah's reign, things were finally looking up. Israel had just gotten out from under 100 years of Assyrian reign and occupation. Assyria was the big superpower of the day. Finally they were collapsing. And a very young King Josiah's reign (technically his mother called a lot of the shots believe it or not because HE was so young), there was a religious revival of sorts; the temple was restored, and there was a sense that the divided kingdom (the north and the south), might just be reunited again.

King Josiah's reign longed nostalgically for the days of King David and Solomon and all of that glory. But tragically, Josiah was killed in a battle against Egypt, and the years that followed his death were hard.⁴ If Israel had taken one step forward during this reign, they were about to take not just two or three steps back, but essentially they were trampled by somebody's else's steps. Because—there was a new superpower in town. Babylon. This is what happens in our word. When one falls, another arises.

And the question I suppose we all must ask ourselves objectively at any point in history is: are we the powerful superpower that is trampling others, OR are we the ones being trampled? God, of course, wants neither. Neither is God's dream. The dream is living together, in peace, equally and equitably. But because the balance of power always sways toward the superpower of the day, the role of the prophet was to be a voice for the people, and again, not just the people, but the desires of God for the people. Monarchy often got monovision...focusing on ruling and power and land and wealth. If priests were there to counteract that monovision and monopoly and say '*God has called us to be a covenant people, not a capturing or conquering people,*' prophets arose to keep the priests accountable when they got too cozy and comfortable with the kings.

And then, just to conclude our history lesson real quick, there was a lot of change over with the kings. King Josiah's successor, his eldest son, was short lived as king. He was

⁴ Bracke, pg 13.

deposed by the Pharaoh of Egypt. The Pharaoh made another one of Josiah's sons the King, Jehoiakim. Essentially because the Pharaoh of Egypt appointed him, Jehoiakim ruled as a subject king of Egypt and Egypt was trying to contend with this new superpower in town, Babylon, and "keep the peace" so to speak.

Initially Jehoiakim paid tribute to Babylon's king, Nebuchadnezzar, but when Babylon was threatened by Egypt, Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon. In other words, he (as the king of Judah), stood up for his ruling power, Egypt. And Babylon answered, not only punishing Egypt, but all of its vassal states, including Judah.

Babylon moved in on Jerusalem, and King Jehoiakim died. His son, Jehoiachin became king, and he's the one that really had to deal with the backlash from Babylon. They attacked in 597, and King Jehoiachin surrendered. He was less rebellious than his father. The Babylonians looted the Temple and took the leaders of the city (religious and political), including Jehoiachin, as

captives to Babylon. This was the first wave of exiles.⁵

Perhaps now is a good time to remind you that the Temple in Jerusalem was not just an important religious worship space or community gathering space, although it was both of those things. It was also thought to be where the living presence of God dwelled, so for the Jewish people, the Israelites, destroying the Temple felt like destroying God. Not only were they banished from their land, driven out, so was God. It was devastating.

Babylon knew someone needed to rule in Jerusalem though, given that they had taken the king to their land, so they appointed Jehoiachin's uncle as king in Jerusalem and named him Zedekiah. King Zedekiah, like his other family members, struggled to find a way through the conflict between Babylon and Egypt. It was just too big and it dominated everything. Zedekiah was indecisive and he lacked skilled advisors around him. Eventually, he just decided to rebel against Babylon, but that proved to be a disastrous decision. In 587 (ten years after the first attack on the Temple

⁵ Bracke, pg 14.

and wave of exiles), Babylon attacked Jerusalem with full force. The whole city was sacked and burned. The Temple was completely destroyed, and more captives were taken to Babylon, including King Zedekiah, this was after Babylon executed his two sons in front of him and then blinded him.⁶

So ALL of this, my friends, is the context of Jeremiah's life and his prophetic call. He witnessed the fall of Jerusalem, that is the destruction of God's house, God's presence, and the decimation of his land, his people, and his religion. Jeremiah himself fled with others to Egypt, escaping Babylon, but living under an oppressive regime, but one that was slightly better than Babylon. Jeremiah's prophetic career and his life ended as an exile in Egypt; he never got to return to Judah or Jerusalem.

So when we say today that it feels like our world is upside down. That our very democracy is threatened by leadership that caves to the desires of Christian Nationalism and is unapologetically nationalistic in a way that puts one people over

all other peoples, lauding wealth and power over people...when we say that it feels like God is absent or the center of the moral or ethical compass is eschew or altogether gone...when we see billions of dollars going into warfare and weapons and what feels like pennies going to food and housing...when we see borders and walls hailed as solutions to keeping refugees and asylum seekers from finding safety or being reunited with family...as we see bombs destroying villages in an instant and white supremacist rhetoric and actions fueling hate crimes against Temples, Mosques, black churches...as we wrestle with the political complexity of the very same land that Jeremiah lived on back in his day, as people in Gaza are displaced and killed, as terrorist groups like Hamas rise up in rebellion against military and occupation superpowers, *and as faithful Jewish people and innocent Palestinian families are caught up in it all*—we can say that *we know* the landscape of Jeremiah's day. The particulars are different, but the story is the same, and so is the impact.

⁶ Bracke, pg 15.

Famine and hunger, war and occupation, homelessness and generational trauma—this is the landscape into which Jeremiah was born.

Jeremiah's **context** was not favorable. And perhaps that's what makes his **call** unforgettable. Remember, he was a child, a boy. Jeremiah's call did not come *after* he had proven himself, or had a few internships and degrees and reference letters. Jeremiah had no experience, no qualifications, no credentials. Jeremiah was called by God not because of what he had done but because of who God created him to be. Jeremiah's call was not based on past experience but on future potential.

God knew Jeremiah from before the womb, and had a role for him to play in the world. I find this to be one of the most hopeful call stories in the Bible. Because it comes when Jeremiah is so young. God knows Jeremiah's abilities even before Jeremiah knows them himself and certainly before the world has a chance to see them.

If you are here today sensing that God might be calling you to something but you don't have the right education or training or

experience, let Jeremiah's call inspire you and inform how you answer. Listen to what is stirring within. Perhaps God has called you to something that the world has not yet cultivated. Young or old, educated or not, heavily experienced or under qualified, time and time again we see in Scripture that what WE think are the credentials of a calling are nothing of what God deems to be needed for a call. God is calling all the time – all ages, life experiences, backgrounds and beliefs. Like young Mary, who would become the mother of Jesus, God, I think, is just waiting for us to listen to the calling that is happening all around us and within us and hoping just a fraction of us will say, *"Yes, here I am, let it be with me according to your will."*

Of course, before Jeremiah answers his call, he offers his "can't", his excuse for why he can't do the thing that God is asking him to do—be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah says, *"I can't do that, I'm just a boy, I don't know how to speak!"* Perhaps you have used those very excuses in your life before. I can't, I'm too young. I can't, I don't have any experience.

Or perhaps your excuses are different:

I can't, I'm too old.
 I can't, I don't have time.
 I can't, I'm too stuck in my ways.
 I can't, I'm too introverted.
 I can't, I'm too easily distracted.
 I can't, I'm not tech savvy.
 I can't, I don't know how.
 I can't, I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing.
 I can't, I'm afraid people will think I don't know what I'm doing.
 I can't, I don't know the language.
 I can't, my kids are too young.
 I can't, my partner needs me to do X, Y, or Z.
 I can't, my job is too much.
 I can't, my parents need me.
 I can't, I'm too weak.
 I can't, I'm not good with numbers.
 I can't, I'm not good at public speaking.
 I can't, nobody knows who I am.
 I can't, nobody will care what I say.
 I can't, it's just not worth it.

Whatever your "I can't" is, perhaps what you need to hear today is that God "cans" our "I can'ts" with a simple truth that we can't argue with. God says, "*Don't give me your 'I can't,'*

because "I can." And "I am with you."

God counters our fear with God's presence. Have you ever thought about the fact that most things worthwhile in our lives are a little fear-inducing in some way? Most things worthwhile are risky. To love is to risk loss. To speak is to risk saying the wrong thing. To act is to risk doing something wrong. To walk is to risk falling. To work for justice for all is to risk losing privilege or status for self. To have faith is to risk losing control. To trust is to risk betrayal. To hope is to risk disappointment.

God knows that what God is calling us to in this world—righting wrongs, loving all people, creating just systems, feeding the hungry, housing the unhoused, freeing the captive, giving sight to the blind—God knows this is hard stuff. That it is not easy. And, I believe, God knows that we'll never be fully qualified or educated or 'ready' for any of it. It doesn't mean training and education aren't important. It doesn't mean experience and mentoring, teaching and learning aren't important. It simply means that to answer a call, we don't need those things first. We can

answer and then figure out the next step. If we wait to have it all figured out or to be fully educated or trained, then we'll never do anything. The truth is, we'll never be fully prepared by what we think we need to know to be prepared. But what God is telling Jeremiah and us is that God doesn't expect perfection from us, God promises presence for us. That's what a call is. Listening for what God is asking us to do in this world to help create the kin-dom of God here on earth and saying yes and returning to God again and again when we are afraid and saying, *"Here I am God, I'm afraid, but I'm here....show me where to go, what to do, what to say."*

Do you think I felt qualified to become your pastor at age 27, Calvary? Twenty-seven!? It's crazy. Truly. Yet, you sensed the Spirit and called me. And I sensed the Spirit calling and said Yes. And has it been perfect? No, not at all. Yet God has been present with us through it all, and here we are today over 15 and a half years later, still trying to figure out what it means to follow God, but doing so TOGETHER.

Even more, I never even thought I could ever be a pastor because

I'm an introvert and I get incredibly nervous anytime I have to speak in public.

Yet here I am today. I am a preaching pastor, who is still very much an introvert and who still gets nervous every time I speak in public – no matter how big or small the crowd – and yet I just to do it. Not because I want to really, but because I feel called to do it, and somehow in that calling, "wanting or not wanting to do something" falls away, and a greater purpose comes into view. It's not about what I want, it's about how God is using my gifts for something beyond myself.

That sounds fancy or lofty, but it's truly what each and every one of us does every day in our own way. There is no perfect context or circumstance for any calling. Jeremiah's context was the worst of the worst. God is patient. God will wait out our "can'ts" because God needs our cans. And God is giving us not just a calling to be disciples and to love others as deeply as we love ourselves and to love God faithfully and wholly. God is also giving us a commission, specific instructions on what it means to be a prophetic voice and witness today. And it's up

to us to discern those instructions.

And this is the last part of our text that I think is so important. Jeremiah is appointed over nations and over kingdoms to do six things. Before we get into those six things, I just want to say that being appointed over nations and kingdoms is a really big commission! This is BIG stuff that God is calling Jeremiah to do. And Jeremiah, remember, is just a little boy at this point.

Lesson number one is that children can do big things, as we've all seen in a number of ways before – often children and young people are at the forefront of resistance movements and creative thinking that helps other people in ways that entrenched systems can't. But lesson number two is that perhaps God is calling ALL of us to think BIGGER when it comes to what we are called to do. Yes, we are to do good things in our neighborhoods and in our churches and communities, but we are also ALL called as disciples to bring the kin-dom of God here to earth in the here and now. How might we need to be thinking bigger? What do we need to do

statewide, nationally, globally? And what will that take?

I think the biggest lesson for us today in terms of what it will take comes in these six verbs that God gives to Jeremiah. God tells Jeremiah he will need to pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow, build, and plant. If you are keeping track, four of those words are words of removal or subtraction: pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow. And only two are positive, or additive: build and plant. Jeremiah's call is two thirds destruction, one third construction.

Often as people of faith, our default is to think that building or creating the kin-dom of God means doing 'positive' things in the world, adding acts of charity and kindness that make a difference in someone's life. And there is no doubt that those actions are needed and make a difference. We start a new ministry to meet a need or form a non-profit to give aid to a certain group of disenfranchised people. But what about looking at the systems that are causing people to be disenfranchised or to need financial aid or support?

But charity work, helping a small group of people navigate

the systems of our day that are inherently unjust, well, that's Charity is needed in the short term, but could it be that we might be in a season of our history where we, Church, need to focus more on the removing of sick systems that are not healthy, rather than handing out more and more band aids?

There are seasons for building up and seasons for tearing down...and at all times, we must listen for the wisdom of God...is this a season where we need to be building more or do we need to be pulling down what has been built that is no longer serving us or, is in fact, harming others?

This is not an easy question. It requires great discernment and wisdom. But it is worth asking. Being a disciple is not always about adding more good into the world, sometimes it is about taking away the harmful in the world.

Proportionally, from the outset, God is telling Jeremiah that his commission to fulfill his calling as a prophetic voice is going to be two-thirds taking apart, and only one-third building something new. The building the new thing is always exciting, the planting seeds of faith in

new ways is hopeful. People tend to praise new non-profits or new efforts of making change in the world or helping others. But the stopping something old or eradicating a system that is harming people? The divesting of military spending? The taking down of confederate monuments? The removing or deconstructing of something is always harder and always fraught with more criticism and critique.

Just think about your own life of faith and when you need to deconstruct something you have believed your whole life. It's not easy to dismantle a belief. But eventually, that letting the old belief fall away is what allows you to make space for the new belief to take root.

I want us to really dial into these six verbs today as we are at the middle of our Eastertide series, *The World Made Well*. What might these six verbs be telling us about how to make the world well?

Let's start with the first four; they are about subtracting or removal, yet they increase in intensity: Pluck Up, Pull Down, Destroy, Overthrow.

First (lowest intensity) – pluck up. To pluck something up reminds me of what we’ll all be doing here in a few weeks once our gardens start growing. We’ll be plucking up weeds that arise in the midst of our otherwise healthy gardens. Or we’ll pluck off (or cut off) a sick branch of a tree, or a dead bloom on a flowering. rose bush. Spiritually and prophetically speaking, to pluck something up is to look at a situation and ask ourselves, as a whole, is this system overall working pretty well? If so, are the flaws in this system something that can just be plucked up (like a bad apple) to remove the harm, keeping the overall system intact because otherwise it’s working well? But it’s an important question to ask ourselves when we see something that is unjust or a situation that breaks our hearts. Is this because of the system itself? OR is it because someone in the system made a mistake or is causing harm? Do a few weeds need to be pulled or plucked up rather than the whole garden bed redone?

The next verb is to pull down. This reminds me of pulling a curtain down over a scene, or pulling the curtain back to reveal the Wizard of Oz. Pulling down, in terms of justice, might

mean, pulling down one set of rules in the classroom in order to put up a new set of rules. In this scenario, the classroom itself is okay, the students and the teacher are okay, but they’ve been functioning with an outdated or unjust system of rules that need to be replaced. Pulling down old history books off shelves that are not honoring of the full truth of our past would be one example of this.

Another example of pulling down, could be “pulling back the curtain” on a system where something major is happening that is causing harm or fault but everyone is kind of going along with it – knowingly or unknowingly. This involves ‘revealing’ what would rather not be seen. It’s what “whistleblowers” do. They take a risk to reveal something big about a company or a branch of the government that isn’t right. Again, it’s not that the whole system is bad, but something more than just one bad apple needs to be plucked. Something bigger needs to be revealed or rewritten or re-established.

Pulling down is often about the rules of operation or engagement. One example from my own life is that I’m trying to remove or ‘pull down’ words or

phrases that give a nod to gun violence. So I'm trying not to say words like "trigger" or "bullet points" or "shoot me an email." And it's really hard to rid by day to day vocabulary of these phrases. So if you hear me say something that nods to gun violence, please tell me. You have my permission. I want to be held accountable, I need the community helping me with this.

The next verb, and the next level, is to destroy. Like a kid knocking down the tower we built, sometimes the only way to get to the building blocks we need to build something new is to destroy or knock down the first tower. Maybe the first tower served us well, or maybe a system served a society for a while, but the minute we acknowledge it's not serving us or others anymore, it's time for it to be destroyed. Completely leveled. This is because there is more that is not working than working.

I was in Salt Lake City this week and visited the Temple Grounds of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Salt Lake City is THE gathering place for Mormons around the world, and they have a completely open construction site where you can

see how they are fixing the foundation underneath all of their structures. The hole in the ground is huge, and you can see all the tunnels they are building for wires and supports and all the ways they are supporting the foundation so that if an earthquake comes, the foundation will move and shift with the quaking earth, but the Temple and buildings on top of the foundation will stay in tact. It's kind of an engineering masterclass to watch and read about. No matter what you believe about the Church of Latter Day Saints, what they realized is that the foundation that all of their building were on was weak in sufficient for the structures they were seeking to support, so they are leveling everything, bit by bit, and rebuilding, but not without massive foundation work first. This is not something that could be fixed without destroying completely what was.

Destroying a structure or system implies that you have the authority to destroy it. The Mormons can knock down their own buildings if they want to, they built them. The United States could abolish and destroy the system of slavery if we wanted to, and we (eventually) did. We haven't yet destroyed

the thought practices or racism at its root, which has allowed other unjust systems to grow up in its place, but should we want to destroy systems that perpetuate systemic racism (like mass incarceration) we have the power within our own government and voting body to that. We can destroy systems that we created that are no longer serving us and that are harming people of color in disproportional measure. We don't need someone from outside of our country to do that for us. We have the agency and power ourselves to take account of the systems that are not serving us, and we can destroy them if we want to.

That is an incredibly hopeful thought to me. It's also impossible to imagine it actually happening, because destroying what you yourself created is always hard, and retrospectively, we want to think we always had the best intentions in place, but the truth is sometimes good intentions have horrific impact upon some reflection, and we need to be okay with destroying things that are oppressive (both things that were built to be oppressive intentionally and systems that have become oppressive unintentionally over time).

Think about shattering the glass ceiling. That metaphor has become a positive one as we think about women progressing in the workforce into positions of leadership. At first, as women became CEOs, there were just cracks or fissures in the ceiling. But a complete shattering will take a full acknowledgement of equity in the workplace – in all workplaces – across our country. We have made huge strides, but there is still more shattering to go.

Then we get to the final verb, Overthrow. Which is, the most complicated I think. And it is here that I'll remind you that God is telling Jeremiah that sometimes overthrowing is necessary. Overthrowing is similar to destroying, except if destroying is something you have power or authority to do because you created it (like destroying a system within your own country or a tower you built with your own blocks), overthrowing is when you go beyond the bounds of your authority or earthly-created boundary line to topple over something and destroy something that is not in your direct authority or power.

A negative example is in our scripture today. The Babylonians overthrow Jerusalem and the Temple. It is not their religious center or city or land, but they come in and overthrow it and take it over. Today we see the IDF overthrowing Gaza, literally grounding it to rubble, and thousands of innocent people too. And of course, the IDF would say they are doing that because Hamas overthrew the moral/ethical line of warfare, of attacking innocent Jews and executing them cruelly, and taking others hostage. They took something that was not theirs to take (life) and so in retaliation, the other group does the same. I think of overthrowing as distinctive from destroying in that in order to overthrow something, you have to go past or through an authority figure or region or system that you don't control. Overthrowing always involves some kind of breach beyond the bounds of your given authority.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian leader who fought against the horrors of Nazi Germany, was executed because of his involvement in a plot to overthrow, or assassinate, Adolf Hitler. It's one of the great moral questions in our faith. Is it

just to use violence to kill or overthrow a person or system that is killing many more people?

These are deep and complex questions that call us, again and again, back to our creation as beloved children of God and our call to non-violence as Christ led us through his example. The question of when and how something should be overthrown – a person or a system – should never be taken lightly. But we certainly all wonder about this when we see the actions of one leader completely eradicating systems of democracy or freedoms that we have worked hard for over decades to instill.

But it seems that God is telling Jeremiah there are times where he will need to consider what it means to go outside of the authority that humanity has given him religious or politically or otherwise, to answer to a higher authority – that of God – and put, perhaps, even his own life on the line for a cause he cares about. Whether or not you agree with the college students who, this week across our country, are protesting the money the United States gives to Israel for military spending and defense, you could

say they are seeking to 'overthrow' something through a peaceful, protest.

In line with other civil rights movements and marches and protests, when you do not have authority to make a change yourself, sometimes the way you 'overthrow' a system is to make a point so powerfully that the people who do have authority have to pay attention to you – through blocking traffic, or buildings in mass numbers – so that the people in authority hear you/see you/ and therefore listen to you and have to evaluate their actions. The students do not have a way to stop their universities from supporting the IDF. But they can overthrow the policies that do hold that power by making demands of the people who control those policies.

These four actions – plucking up, pulling down, destroying, and overthrowing – are necessary in the work of building God's kin-dom. Not only to remove harm, but also to make way for healing.

And this is where the last two verbs come in, building and planting. When we build something, we have to have room to build it. And generally,

we have a blueprint of what we want to build and how to build it. There's a plan and people are involved who imagine and dream up a new system or way of being in the world. Those who advocate for restorative justice have built a new system for handling those who break the law. They have a blueprint that is not the structure of the current prison system. Their blueprint and building plan will not be fully realized until the current system of mass incarceration is destroyed, but those working for restorative justice can make some progress side by side with the buildings of unjust incarceration that remain.

When we build something new, we usually get to see the final outcome. We have a measure of control (or at least the illusion of control), and we feel that what we are building will make a difference. Part of our work as kin-dom co-creators with God, is to build systems that heal and care for all people, medical systems and therapy systems, food and housing systems. These are not just individual 'buildings' metaphorically speaking, but whole 'cities or networks of buildings' that are going to take a long time. But just because they are manmade,

does not mean they are not part of what it means to create and maintain justice here on earth.

A bit more abstract, and more risky and unwieldy, is the final verb – to plant. Planting is something that humans are a part of, but we do not control the process. There is so much mystery! We plant a seed, but then outside forces, water, sun, insects, soil, and so forth, grow roots and eventually create a plant that blossoms or bears fruit. In other words, when we plant something in this world, spiritually speaking, or justice speaking, we do part of it, but we also realize it's not all up to us. We realize that God is at work in ways we cannot imagine, and we allow God to take our idea, our initiation, and grow it into something more than we could ever dream or imagine. This is when we have an idea about something in the world that is a little crazy and 'out there' but that we just trust that God is calling us to do and we do it anyway even though we can't see the final picture. We take a chance and put our puzzle piece in, hoping and trusting that God will finish the puzzle through the calls and commissions of other people. This is the long moral arc of the universe of which the Rev. Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke. It bends toward justice. And though we may have planted a seed that will eventually grow a stalk that bends and arcs toward justice, we may not be the one who lives to see that happen but that doesn't mean that God doesn't need to us to be planting seed after seed after seed anyway.

It seems to me that in our day where so many systems and injustices are entrenched in how we do things and how long we've been doing them, planting can be a tangible sign of hope. We need building, of course, but often to build we have to destroy or overthrow first. Planting is something we can do whether or not what needs to be destroyed or overthrown has been destroyed or overthrown. Planting can happen alongside unjust systems, and life can arise in the midst of pain, just as a flower busts through through the cracks of concrete on a sidewalk.

To plant is to sow seeds, and we know from the parable of the sower, that our job is sometimes to keep throwing the seeds of justice and equity and love and hope far and wide and not try to control where or how they land.

All six forms of prophetic speaking and action are needed. We need people who are plucking up bad things from an otherwise good garden. We need people who are pulling down new sets of rules or pulling down curtains that are hiding faulty power structures. People who see a part of a system that needs to be fixed, and who can do that, while persevering what is still good and working. We need people who can destroy the systems they have the authority to destroy because they've created them. People who can say, *"you know, this is not working. Maybe we thought it did at one point, but it's not anymore...we need to start from scratch...let's destroy what is here so we can make room to build something new."*

And finally, yes, sometimes overthrowing is needed. Sometimes we need to be the prophetic voice and eyes from the outside of a system, or organization, or government that can look at something across the street or across the globe and say "this isn't right...this must come down." And again, overthrowing need not be violent or hurt people. Jesus overthrew the tables in the Temple in anger, something

outside of his authority level, but he wanted to prove a point, pointing to the higher authority he answered to – God. The best protests and marches seek to overthrow by collective persuasion and action. Even when we think we may not have power, we actually do when we're in community!

And of course, building and planting are needed. Those are easier concepts for us to grab a hold of because they are less offensive and risky. Very few people will fault us for starting something new to help others or by planting a seed of an idea that may be crazy and never take or that may be brilliant and change the world. People in our society admire that. It's the first four verbs that take more courage and risk.

And I suppose the message of today's sermon is just that. To make the world well, we are going to have to take risks and be courageous Calvary. There is no way around it. Just as in Jeremiah's day, we are living in a world where things need to be plucked up, pulled down, destroyed, and overthrown, and where things need to be built and planted. In Jeremiah's prophetic career, Judgment for what is not working well is

always met in equal or greater measure by God's mercy and hope for Restoration that all will, one day, "Be well."

And this is my last and final point for today. Moving our world from injustice to justice, from trauma to healing, from inequity to equity, from racism / anti-Semitism / islamophobia / transphobia to belovedness and belonging, from "I-llness" with an I to "we-llness" with a "W" E", is a matter of moving away from "I" thinking and into "We" thinking.

Sometimes I wonder if the world remains ill (in part) because 1) I overplay myself. I try to do things on my own without God OR 2) I downplay myself. I think that nothing I do will make a difference OR 3) (maybe most common for someone like me with privilege) I think only about how things affect me and not others. Perhaps that "I" thinking keeps the world from moving from I-llness to We-llness. Could the "we" in wellness mean you and me? It's simple, but profound. Wellness is created in community.

None of these six verbs from Jeremiach are solitary actions. These are not things we can do

on our own as "I's", we need to be "We"'s as the church and as the prophetic voice holding our leaders and governments and power structures accountable, even leaders and structures within our own church. In this season, could it be that removing what is harmful needs to take precedence over doing what is helpful? It's not "either/or", it's "both/and."

Remember, Jeremiah tried to say the task was too hard. He gave his "I can't" to God and God said, "no excuses." Whatever your "I can't" is – name it aloud. To a pastor, a trusted friend, someone in this community, to God. Sometimes saying our fear out loud helps us realize that there is a "CAN" within our "CAN'T". More often than not, when we say "I can't" instead of "I can" when it comes to justice issues or divisive things in our public life together that are hard to reconcile, we say "I can't" because we are thinking of "I" and "me" or "my needs" or "my perspective" over the collective "we" needs of the broader community. And we don't do this maliciously. It's just part of human nature.

Each of us has a calling that forms our unique I-voice, but

none of us live out that calling alone. It is always a “we” – it is a community effort with others and with God. Jeremiah was not a prophet in isolation, God always promises God’s presence, and God delivers on that promise even when Jeremiah is at his lowest moments.

Listen to how God is calling you today. Pick a verb out of those six. Listen for how God is calling you to make the world well. Do you see something that can be plucked up, pulled down, destroyed, overthrown, built, or planted? All are needed. Pick something, one thing. And know that your one thing becomes a collective thing when we are all doing something.

Even though Jeremiah’s calling was individual, he knew that the life of his community was at stake. The problems of our world are complex and they need all of us. Illness does not have a chance to become Wellness unless we replace “I” with “WE.” The world’s Wellness depends on WE, on you and me. And we only get to the WE, when each of us answers God’s call with an “I can.”

Amen.