

Worship and Perspectives Service
August 24, 2010

Anticipating Reminiscence

Jeremiah 1:4-10

- 4 *Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,*
5 *"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."*
6 *Then I said, "Ah, Lord God!
Truly I do not know how to speak,
for I am only a boy."*
7 *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.*
8 *Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."*
9 *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.*
10 *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."*

Between July 22 and August 10, my family and I drove about 6200 miles. We made a big, clockwise circle from Sherman to San Francisco; to Newport, Oregon; Forks, Washington; Whitefish, Montana; Williston, North Dakota; and back to Sherman.

Six of us were packed into my Toyota Sienna minivan – my wife, my 9th grade daughter, my second grade son, and my parents.

I know that some people's heart rate doubles at the very thought of enduring a trip like that – with *kids!* and *parents!* and *in-laws!* – but we're kind of road-trip geeks and I think a good time was had by all. We do something like that nearly every year.

If you're interested, I'd be happy to tell you stories about the trip and show you any or all of the 500 or 600 photos that we have. But that's not what we're here to do this morning.

But there *are* two things related to my vacation that are relevant for us today.

First, I knew before we left that this day was coming. And I had already decided that this year's Worship and Perspectives service would be built around the story that Courtney just read to us from the first chapter of Jeremiah. That passage was bouncing around in my head a little throughout our Great Western Journey.

The other relevant thing is that most of our 6200 miles on the road were spent with me driving and my Dad in the passenger seat.

My Dad is 70 years old. He's an electrical engineer by training who spent his entire career working for TXU or one of its predecessor electric service companies in Texas. And a big – and enjoyable to me – part of what he does as we drive mile after mile after mile is tell stories.

He reminisces. And that's fun for me – sometimes because I remember the stories that he tells but also because – even though I've known him for 48 years – he sometimes tells stories, about his life and occasionally about my life, that I don't remember ever having heard before!

It's fun. My Mom and Dad are healthy. They like traveling. They like being grandparents. They like Linnea. And they put up with me. They couldn't be Joseph or Emily's grandparents without me – and I try to exploit that fact whenever I can.

One of my favorite parts of those trips is listening to Dad reminiscence.

It has occurred to me in the last few days that my Dad is a little like Jeremiah. I think Jeremiah is reminiscing in the passage that we've just heard. I don't think this is a contemporaneous account of a particular, concrete experience of a precocious little boy. This feels more like an old man looking back on his life – reminiscing – constructing a narrative to make sense of his rich, meaningful, varied experiences.

It's easy for me to imagine Jeremiah riding shotgun and telling one story after another.

I think Jeremiah's and my Dad's reminiscences are similar in at least three ways.

First, both sets of reminiscences include some sense of a larger **context** in which they understand their individual stories.

For my Dad, his entire career was spent with one company. He was hired in 1961 as an employee of Texas Electric Service Company and he retired 36 years later from TXU – a company formed by the merger of Texas Electric, Dallas Power & Light, and Texas Power & Light.

In all those years, the company that employed him saw itself as a *service* company – a company that existed to deliver electric service to all the residents of a given area. The electric industry has changed a lot since then. Now electricity is treated more as a commodity than as a service. But for my Dad, being an employee of a company that generated and distributed electricity was a form of service. And that commitment to service lay at the core of the life of the company he worked for. All of his memories, stories, and experiences are understood in the context of the life of a company that valued – and was committed to – service. When he reminisces, he remembers everything through that filter.

Jeremiah's memories are contextual as well. As he thinks back on his prophetic career, he interprets all of his experiences in the **context** of a larger narrative – the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel.

I think that's what he's getting at when he talks about God having known and chosen him before he was born. That's Jeremiah's way of recognizing that his whole career took place in a context larger than his individual story.

Like my Dad, when Jeremiah reminisces, his memories are filtered through the context of a grand, important, value-centered narrative.

Although I don't remember him using this term, I think a lot of my Dad's reminiscences involve **confidence**. In his career, he was given responsibilities for which his engineering education did not necessarily prepare him. At one time or another, my slide-rule wielding, pencil-sharpening engineer father had responsibilities in the areas of finance, government relations, and personnel. As he looks back on his career, he remembers with gratitude the confidence that his bosses exhibited toward him by inviting and enabling him to stretch and grow in his service to the company and its customers.

And I think that confidence of others led him to approach difficult and unexpected situations in his work with an appropriate level of confidence as well.

Jeremiah's reminiscence includes a frank admission of his own lack of confidence. God tells him, "I've got big plans for you." But Jeremiah responds fearfully:

*I do not know how to speak.
I am only a boy.*

God's not having any of that. He tells, Jeremiah:

Do not say, "I am only a boy."

and later

I am with you.

That's Jeremiah's way of remembering the fact that—even though he might not originally have been confident in his ability to do what he was being called to do—God's confidence in him was unshakable.

That confidence that he received from outside himself led Jeremiah to develop a confidence of his own. I think that's what's going on as Jeremiah remembers God telling him,

Now I have put my words in your mouth.

As they reminisce, both my Dad and Jeremiah remember being the recipients of the confidence of others and developing their own confidence as they faced challenges and struggles.

After context and confidence, the third thing that my Dad and Jeremiah have in common as they reminisce about their experiences is a sense of having made significant **contributions** to a larger, important story.

More than once, I remember my Dad telling me that he used to love flying into DFW Airport at night because he would think—with some legitimate satisfaction—that he played a small role in making possible the delivery of the electricity that powered all those lights he could see from horizon to horizon.

I never thought that was a cocky or bombastic sentiment. It was simply some evidence of his satisfaction at having made a meaningful contribution to the lives of others.

This gets a little trickier with Jeremiah, but I think it might be the case that when he reports God's instruction to him to

*Pluck up and to pull down
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant*

Jeremiah is remembering things that he had already done in his prophetic career. As Jeremiah reminisces and tries to construct a narrative in which to interpret his life and his work, I think he's cataloging things that he's done – plucking up, pulling down, destroying, overthrowing, building, and planting – things he believes are contributions to the life of the community that he was part of.

I think maybe that both Jeremiah and my Dad – when they reminisce about their lives –

- remember a larger context in which their particular lives played out ;
- remember the confidence that others showed in them and the confidence that they developed;
- and they remember contributions that they made to a larger community.

Thirty years ago this month, I entered Austin College as a freshman.

As I look back on my life in the thirty years since then, my reminiscences are a little like Jeremiah's and my Dad's.

I remember learning that I'm part of a narrative that's much bigger than my individual story. For good or ill – I'm always gonna think like an Austin College person.

As I reminisce, I also remember the confidence communicated to me by folks like Bill Tiemann, Harry Smith, Light Cummins, Vicki Cummins, Carol Daeley, and lots of other folks around here. (Of course Light, Vicky, and Carol were just precocious youngsters in those days).

I remember the confidence I developed as a result of the confidence that I experienced here.

And I like to think that I've been able to build on some of what I learned here about how to take the right things seriously and to make some small contributions in the lives of some other people.

Context, confidence, and contributions are clearly some of the most important filters that I use as I think back on my life – as I reminisce about the last thirty years.

Thirty years from now, I bet most of the young people who we'll welcome to our campus in the next few days will think about us as they reminisce.

I think, as we prepare for their arrival, we should take a minute to reflect on the privilege and honor that we all have of being characters in their future reminiscences.

I hope we can think about the **context** we want to create for their reminiscences.

Let's work hard to ensure that – when they remember this community – they remember us as

- * a community that embodies respectfulness and respectability;
- * a community that embraces and celebrates diversity; and
- * a community that cultivates and cherishes excellence.

Let's be sure this is a place where our students are given space and opportunity to gain **confidence**.

Let's encourage them.

Let's accompany them as they stretch and grow.

Let's expect a lot from them.

And let's celebrate with them when they excel.

This should be a place where outstanding young women and young men experience the confidence of others and develop confidence in themselves.

And let's be sure this is a place where students are invited, encouraged, and enabled to make **contributions** to the lives of the communities that they are part of – where they learn in no uncertain terms both that they are gifted and beloved and that gifted and beloved people should act gifted and beloved.

Let's spend this year anticipating the reminiscences of our students. Let's pay particular attention to the context we create; the confidence that we exhibit and evoke; and the contributions that we can make and can invite from them.

I think you can make a good case that *that's* what's worth paying for at this place.

We can do that. We should do that.

That's the promise we make when we cash their checks and invite them to be part of this community.