

“Yes, Even You”
Jeremiah 1:4-10

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I'm just back from a trip to California, my home state, the centerpiece and main agenda of which was visiting my family back in my hometown Bakersfield. My mom and her husband, my older brother and his wife and two kids, and my grandfather all still live in Bakersfield. Normally when I go back home my family pauses their usual schedules, they take time off work to hang out, and they take a mini-vacation from their daily life as much as I do without enduring a long day of travel beforehand. We have a lot of fun catching up and making new memories together.

This trip was a bit different - we still had fun, but no one was able to press pause on the demands of daily life. My wife and I arrived at a moment when every single person in my family - except for us! - was deep in the throes of a major life transition. We were blissfully stress free and arrived to whirlwind of anticipation and uncertainty. All we could do was show up, observe, and listen to each of them.

You see, my niece started high school last week, an expected transition but a big one in her life nonetheless. On the same day, her brother, my nephew, moved into his freshman dorm at San Diego State University - almost five hours away from home. The kids were both prepared and confident but also aware that they couldn't fully be ready for what was waiting for them in their new schools, leaving them nervous.

Their parents were, quite frankly, a wreck. As they should be. Two big transitions for their kids meant a major transition for them as well. They know this is one of those moments

when they are supposed to “let go” but they weren’t sure they would know what that means in practice and weren’t sure they wanted to after all.

Across town, my grandpa was preparing for his own move. At the end of this month he is moving out of his home, where he has lived on his own for 6 years since the death of my grandmother, and lived with her for 30 years before that, to move in with my mom and her husband. My grandfather is my mom’s stepdad, and wasn’t on the scene until she was an adult, so this move is a bit of a surprise to both of them. They’ve never lived together before.

They are not just anticipating sharing space for the first time ever, but each of them is also letting go of an idea of how they once imagined their life would unfold at this chapter. Together they are telling a new story that is surely grounded in familial love and commitment, but also compromise.

My mom is making room in her house and in her daily life to welcome a new person with different habits and routines and his own beloved possessions. My grandpa is letting go of his independence, his space, and he is allowing someone else to be his primary caretaker. That takes a lot of trust. He’s rightfully anxious. My mom and her husband are anxious. The rest of us are a bit anxious just as bystanders.

New schools. New life. New ways of being family. New homes. New roommates. Last week I heard the same feelings voiced from every person age 14, 18, 45, 68, and 93: “How am I going to get through this? I’m far too young and I’m not ready yet!”

The bigger the change in our life, the less we are likely to feel like we are totally prepared and ready for it. Usually it feels like we are being shoved forward against our will, protesting that we need more experience or need more information before we can move forward. Maybe you feel too young. Maybe you feel like you need more time. Maybe you feel ill-equipped. Maybe

you are scared about what you are leaving behind or what waits you on the other side of transition and change. Fear manifests in the ways we think we are not capable enough or good enough or ready enough. If you've ever felt this way - whether it was starting a new school or making a big move, whether it was diving into a new relationship or having the courage to end an old one, whether it was accepting a new role at work or daring to define yourself outside of work by entering retirement, you're in good company.

The prophet Jeremiah, long, long ago, was told by God that he was being called to the great and difficult task of working for justice and telling people who didn't want to be told what they needed to do to follow God. Jeremiah's first response to this message from God is to say, "Oh God, Truly I do not know how to speak! How can I be a public speaker spitting out hard messages? I am only a boy!" There is nothing like someone telling you that you are ready, and that you are expected to do great and difficult things to make you feel small and insecure, no matter whether you are a boy or a man, a girl or a woman, young or old, experienced or a novice. I would say that is especially true when the voice comes from God, and God is sending you out to stand for justice in the midst of an unjust country, and it is God who is commanding that you be the voice of prophesy that will first challenge and then save a kingdom from total destruction.

Luckily, Jeremiah had a few assets on his side that helped him rise to the challenge whether or not he felt ready, assets that we have as well when facing our own challenges and difficult calls. Jeremiah had a group of contemporaries with him doing the same thing. He was not a lone prophet in the wilderness, even if it felt like that at times to him. He was leading the same group of people at the same time as other prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel, working together to lead people toward justice, using their distinct voices to create a unified message from God to God's people.

What this means for us is that we should remember we are not the only one who has faced whatever transition that lies before us, or tackled whatever challenge we have been called to. One of the reasons we come together as a church is to share our stories - our uncertainties and fears as well as our triumphs and joys - so that we might empower one another to bravely step into the things we are called to do and remind each other that we are not alone, that there are networks of support and wisdom that will help us through. Sometimes those folks, if they haven't shared your experience, will simply listen and hold space for you, other times they will say, "I've been there. I got through it and so will you."

I have witnessed the ways you all have shown up for each other time and again, from someone sharing a cancer diagnosis and others saying, "I've shared a similar experience and I'll be there to support you" to grad students coming to pray for mercy before the semester begins who just so happen to connect with a retired professor from the same field, someone who is able to offer them the reassurance that no one else can.

When I talked with my nephew last week about going away to college, my advice to him was to say yes as often as possible to people he met. If someone in his dorm hall invited him to dinner, say yes. If someone asked if he wanted to hang out, say yes. Unless it's hanging out at a keg party - I told him to skip those and say yes to the study sessions instead.

Don't make assumptions with someone about how they look or where they are from before getting to know them because when you are in a new place and going through a new thing, you don't know who your people will become. They might look just like you, or they might be totally different and be exactly the kind of support you need down the road. Saying yes to new people and building new relationships casts a net of future support before you need it. It's why we practice being in community before we are in crisis or before we need support through a

transition - we are nurturing the relationships that will support us down the road for the expected and unexpected challenges and transitions. Our faith community helps us say “Yes, I can do this” in the face of our fears and doubts.

The other thing Jeremiah had to lean on for support was God. Jeremiah was equipped, empowered, and called by God to rise to a task that he thought he wasn't ready for. The call from God begins with the reminder that God knows who Jeremiah is inside and out, that God has known Jeremiah since before he knew himself, since before he was born. God says that Jeremiah has been consecrated, that is that everything he has experienced in his life has been preparing him for this next challenge.

God says to Jeremiah the words that were spoken to hesitant prophets before him and would be repeated countless times in years to come, the most repeated words throughout the Bible, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

There are challenges and transitions that feeling exciting, like they are the beginning of new opportunities and experiences, such as starting a new school or moving away from home for the first time. Even in the excitement, fear creeps into those moments. There are also transitions and challenges that feel more like they are the closing of a chapter or the end of an era, like packing your kid up for college or helping them get ready for their first job or like moving from your independent home into the home of a family member or into community living. Fear creeps in there too.

In all of those transitions, all of those moments to which we have been called to show up fully whether or not we are ready, we are not alone. We are surrounded by a community of care and compassion that echoes God's ever-present love. We are part of an ancient story of beginnings and endings, of bold new calls and quiet milestones that shape our lives in ways we

can't control but we can anticipate will be grounded in the love and grace of a God who has been with us from the beginning and will be there every step of the way. "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." May it be so.