

Who is afraid of the big, bad wolf? A German proverb teaches, “Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is.¹” When we fear something, we give it power over us; power to prevent us from realizing our dreams; power to keep us where we are as we are, not necessarily stuck in the mud, but not making much progress either; power to maintain the status quo in our lives and in society.

Is it any wonder then that most often repeated command in the Bible is “*do not be afraid,*” because everything that fear does in us and through us is the very opposite of what God would do in us and through us? And when we heed that command and take verses to heart like: *Jeremiah 1:8 (NRSV) Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.*” We can change, and we can be change-agents in this world that God loves so much that God will not leave it or us alone. When we are tempted to believe that all is lost, there’s nothing we can do, God comes to us with good news! God says to us, “Do not be afraid. Signed, sealed, delivered, I’m yours.”

❶ With apologies to Bill Engvall, “Here’s Your Sign.”

Comedian Bill Engvall has built quite a career for himself by touring with Jeff Foxworthy, Ron White, and Larry the Cable Guy; the Blue Collar Comedy Tour. His signature routine points out some of the foolish things people say; for example, one time he and his buddy were loading their boat back onto its trailer after a day of bass fishing, when a guy at the pier sees all the fish they’ve brought in, and asks, “Did you catch all those fish?”

To which Bill replied, “Nope, we talked them into giving up. Here’s your sign.”

With apologies to Bill, the prophet Jeremiah offers us another sign; a word that is the basis for us to overcome the immobilizing power of fear and take steps in new directions.

Jeremiah’s career begins as Israel approaches its end as a nation-state in the Old Testament. He is born and raised in Anathoth, which is not Jerusalem. Anathoth is where Solomon exiled the high priest Abiathar who found himself on the losing side of the battle to succeed David, so being a priest in Anathoth, and possibly a descendent of Abiathar is not a good line on his resume; it pretty much guarantees his application is on its way to the circular file. His career is summarized in the first 3 verses of the book: *Jeremiah 1:1–3 (NRSV) The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.*

¹ <http://www.quoteagarden.com/fear.html>

What these verses tell us is that Jeremiah’s career began during Israel’s last religious revival under Josiah, continued through the disappointment of that revival not lasting under his successors and the disaster that was the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC and Israel’s removal from the Promised Land. Jeremiah likely ended his days in exile in Egypt.

All of which is to say that Jeremiah faced a lot of fear and lived through tremendous change. The sign that kept him going was the call he received as a boy: *Jeremiah 1:4–5 (NRSV) Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, “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.”*

Chances are you may have read part of this verse before on a bumper sticker or a billboard supporting a pro-life, anti-abortion position; and, if you disagree with that position than you are pro-choice and anti-life.

Isn’t it incredible what we can do with words? Isn’t it amazing how powerful a label can be? Beware and be aware of what is said and of what you say. Use this power wisely and resist the temptation to reduce truth to slogans and sound bites both for the causes you support and for the ones you oppose.

We’ve put this verse in the context of our controversy about abortion; but with apologies to the many good and faithful people who are passionate about that context; that is not the sign this word of God is intended to give. The point is not that God’s knowledge of us extends *in utero*; *Ephesians 1:4 (NRSV)* [tells us] ... *he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love*. The point is that God knows us fully, intimately, personally. God knows our strengths and our weaknesses, our virtues and our vices, our secrets and our successes; God knows all about us; God knows us better than we know ourselves; the One Who formed and fashioned us knows what we are truly capable of; he knows what he *consecrated* us to do, which is to say, what he assigned us to do and sealed us to do in our baptism.

So when fear tempts us to say, “I can’t.” “I’m too young. I’m too old.” “We don’t know how!” Excuses, excuses, excuses. God’s word to us is a word of blessed assurance: *Jeremiah 1:5 (NRSV) “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.”*

Here’s your sign.

② Signed, Sealed, ... Delivered

Change is a fact of life. Tomorrow, students and teachers go back to school and another school year begins. That is a change. The lazy days of summer are over; a new year has begun, and suddenly elementary students are in middle school; middle school students are

freshmen, freshman are sophomores, sophomores - juniors, juniors-seniors, and high school students are freshmen in college?

The Duquette's made that pilgrimage back to West Chester last Sunday as Derek begins his sophomore year. Last year, that was a powerful day for me; this year went better. So Saturday night I sat down to practice the sermon and started channel surfing when what did I find but Toy Story 3.

In brief the Toy Story movies chart the growth of a boy named Andy through the misadventures of his toys, in particular the rootin, tootinest cowboy Woody (given voice by Tom Hanks) and the greatest hero of the galaxy - Buzz Lightyear of Star Command (given voice by Tim Allen).

Toy Story 3 finds Andy to be a 17 year old young man; he and his Mom are packing up his things to go to college; Woody is going to make the trip, but the rest of the toys are destined for the attic.

Many adventures ensue and Woody encounters a little girl who lives nearby. As Andy is finishing packing, Woody writes a note d supposedly from Andy's Mom telling him to give the toys to the girl. In the final scene, Andy introduces each of the toys to the little girl with all of the joy he had with them as a little boy. And then he discovers Woody in the box. For a moment, Andy doesn't want to let go, but the little girl cries out with delight and with a last look of love to the cowboy who's seen him through so much, Andy recognizes what is good and right and true, and hands him over.

Buzz, Woody, and the toys have a new life filled with new joy; and with grief and joy they watch Andy take the next step "to infinity and beyond" as he drives off to college.

The first time I watched that, Derek was 17 and we were preparing for that day, and a good time was had by all! But Saturday night when I watched it, the grief had changed, and it occurred to me that every new beginning starts with a good-bye. It's tempting to resist that good-bye, to hold on to what is because we are afraid of the good-bye that is necessary for something new to begin, but that is not healthy, and when we resist growth we quickly learn that some changes cannot be avoided.

We know deep down that it is good and right and true for our children to take those steps forward into school, through school, "to infinity and beyond." We celebrate those changes even as we grieve.

God's word to Jeremiah invites us to learn from these experiences. God tells us, "Do not be afraid, for I will be with you to deliver you."

This isn't child's play. Far from it! As this school year begins, Antietam and Exeter

Township School Districts continue the conversation about the future of education in our area. They are talking about change and education and money; anxiety is in the air, and if fear rules the day, a significant decision will be made not because of what can be gained but because of what we want to avoid.

We are citizens of these districts. We are Christians in these districts. We are the Church in these districts! And just as Jeremiah was called to proclaim the word of the Lord to the people of God in the midst of change, so we are called in this time and in this place to proclaim the word of the Lord to our fellow citizens and to our leaders so that fear will not rule the day and a significant decision (whatever that decision may be) will emerge from the wisdom and work that is being done rather than from a knee-jerk reaction that says, "We fear what could happen and want to avoid it."

To this irrationality, God says, *"Do not be afraid, for I will be with you to deliver you."*

Fear can make that word of God hard to hear. History shows that Israel did not heed Jeremiah's word and disaster followed. We are called and sent; signed and sealed to deliver this word, so I invite you this week to take a moment and write your school board (Antietam or Exeter) and affirm the work they are doing. If you have an opinion on the matter, offer it, and let them know that you and the members of Pennside Presbyterian Church are praying for them and are hopeful for the future of education in your district. Through this act, and through your words, demonstrate to them that you are not afraid of what the future holds; you are confident because of the One who holds the future; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who says to us today *"Do not be afraid for I will be with you to deliver you."*

Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours. Amen.