

“Enlarge the House of My Soul”

A sermon preached
by the Very Reverend Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
February 3, 2019 \ Jeremiah 1:4-10

My topic this morning is, well, God.

A big, impossible topic, maybe,
for a single sermon. But why *not* tackle a vast,
eternal subject? Why not try?
God, someone once said, is the most interesting
thing about the church.

What could be more worth exploring?

Except that’s not how we sometimes experience
spiritual things. That’s not always how we
experience God.

Our faith may seem little, lackluster.

“Your God Is Too Small,” was the title of a book
that made a splash some years ago.

I’ve never forgotten that phrase, the challenge I
hear in it: Your God Is Too Small.

We go along with mental pictures of a puny little
God which don't do much to inspire us.

Maybe the God you've gotten used to
is a celestial pushover:

Too nice to command respect,
too soft to ask anything demanding.
Instead of a being of unapproachable light,
God becomes more like Deity Lite.

Or maybe yours is a cosmic, crochety grump.
“God as high school principal in a gray suit,” as
the writer Anne Lamott put it, “who never
remembered your name but is always leafing
unhappily through your files.”

Or God as little more than a police officer, just
waiting on the shoulder of the road with speed
trap camera. You're tooling along Gervais Street
or Interstate 26, maybe pushing the speed limit,
and you see a police car parked and waiting,
and immediately your eyes go to your
speedometer, you get uneasy.

We can transfer that kind of unease to God.

Or maybe you think the best we can picture of
God is some impersonal force that keeps the
universe tidy and orderly, but
who doesn't have much to do with you and me.
Who doesn't invite us to commune or pray.

Maybe your God seems dull, not electrifying.

But then a loved one dies, or a friend betrays you,
or you get a diagnosis that leaves you stunned,
or a rug gets pulled out from under you in your
career, or life simply leaves you bewildered.
Or bored. And your spirit cries out for more.

And something makes you think it's possible.
Someone you know might have a vivid experience
of Christ they can't keep quiet about.
You get goosebumps during a choir anthem.
Or you look back and remember a time when
reading the Bible seemed fresh
and full of discoveries.

You realize how quaint and tired
your view of God has gotten.

That's not the picture of God we get in Jeremiah.
For we see in the book that bears his name a God
who is on the one hand, majestic.

A God who makes people sit up and pay attention.

A God harder than nails, stronger than evil's
assaults yet at the same time,
wonderfully condescends to come close.

A God beyond our imagining who, nevertheless,
notices us. Who calls us by name.

Who calls *us*.

That's what Jeremiah found.

God came and gave him a remarkable assurance:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you."

That's how immediate God becomes to him.

God speaks to him
words that unsettle and transform.

It was a good thing God was so definitive.

Jeremiah's was a difficult life. He was persecuted.

Jeremiah is often called the "weeping prophet"
because of his kind, pastoral heart.

Because of the way God kept at Jeremiah to share
words of judgment when it wasn't easy.

He prophesied to the nation of Judah from the
reign of King Josiah in 600 years before Christ.
to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

He witnessed the pain of exile, he saw his people
reduced to refugee status.

And he grieved his people's tottering faith and
their chronic wandering after the idols of the
nations, whom they found more interesting than
the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
the God of Moses and Miriam and the Exodus.
To keep on keeping on Jeremiah needed a big
God and a God-sized vision.

I want us to sit with Jeremiah this morning.

Take away what we can from him.

God can have a larger place in your life.

And God's purposes for you have a larger scope
than you probably think.

God's purposes for our church.

I'm asking you to make room for a God
who's not small, a larger God and a wider vision
for how we pray and how we live.

For Jeremiah meets God. Jeremiah has an
epiphany of God. Jeremiah also has a role.
God honors Jeremiah not just by caring for him,
but also calling him.

Now, he was a reluctant prophet.

He had misgivings.

Like I imagine you do around God, or in the face
of what God might be calling you to.

When called, Jeremiah protests.

He objects that he's too young.

I can't speak, he says.

He might just as well have well objected that he
was too old. Or not seminary educated.

Or not radiating enough charisma.

Jeremiah is the ordinary person's prophet.
For we see throughout the book that bears his
name how he responds to God with anxiety, a
sense of inadequacy, even resentment.
But those small reactions don't disqualify
someone from doing
what God calls that person to do.

In fact, such feelings can be an advantage.
They can make us, like Jeremiah, know that
we have to rely on God. A big God.

"I am with you to deliver you," God says to him.
And that glimpse, that vision,
helps keep him going.

Now you might say, *fine*, for a prophet God might
take special notice and give guidance.

But Scripture makes it clear that God notices all
of us, guides all of us. We all can hear a calling

greater than earning a paycheck or shuttling kids
to practices and rehearsals.

This God who is larger than our imaginations
enlists us in what he hopes to do in the world.

Maybe life right now is grinding you down.
Circumstances you are fighting are making you
feel small. Insignificant. Like a speck in a
universe that seems to want to roll along without
you and your gifts.

At just that place we may be
more open than ever before.

For we realize we need resources
beyond our own.

I love the prayer of Augustine from centuries ago.

"The house of my soul is too small for you to
enter," O God: "make it more spacious by your
coming." (*Confessions*, 1.5.6).

Our souls need enlarging.

It's little in there. Maybe dilapidated,
the walls cracking, the foundation sagging.

Only a big God will fill us and make soul repairs.

Only a big God makes us able for what he calls.

I'm in morning traffic, late to work, angry at the
sluggishness on a normally clear road.

This was years ago. Stretching ahead as far as I
can see is a backed-up river of cars.

The lanes to my right and left are jammed.

I am drumming my palms on the steering wheel,
trying not to get more antsy.

I had left just enough time, and here I am, running
late for my job at a publishing office.

In my agitation I call to mind an ancient prayer

I'm learning, part of which goes,

“God be in my head, and in my understanding.”

It's an ancient prayer,

and also a hymn in our hymnal (#694).

I had jotted the words on an index card.

With traffic at a standstill, I pull it out.

I say it slowly. Soon I realize what I'm asking.

“God be in my eyes, and in my seeing,”
it continues. I can glare at people jockeying with
me for a position in the traffic.

Or I can see with different eyes.

I glimpse other elements in the picture: leafy
maples gracing the roadside, a cloudless blue sky.

God be in my heart, and in my thinking, I say.

I watch the faces of my fellow travelers,
some already weary,
some day-dreaming about the day ahead.

They are honking, on cell phones,
putting on make-up.

And suddenly I see *persons*, not just motorists.
I even pray for them to experience God’s calm.
I have to fight impatience the rest of my trip, as it
turns out. But something is different.

God be in my eyes. I had prayed. In my heart.

An irritating commute turns into an encounter.

In a mundane situation, God shows up.

My car becomes a sanctuary.

Make space in your life for little moments where
you can meet God.

Sometimes you go big by starting small.

We are going to be talking more about habits that
help you grow spiritually in months to come.

Try some new practices! And note the prayer
booklets in the pew racks.

Take one, if you haven't already.

Maybe read just a single prayer a day.

Or repeat it throughout the day.

Or memorize it.

Open a *Book of Common Prayer* this week.

Take a hymn verse. Or a snatch of a psalm. Or a
story about Jesus from the Gospels you come
back to later in your day.

Let them soak your imagination.

God comes by and fills the spaces we leave open.

Experiencing that God and that help, that's worth
every little practice we undertake.

We cannot fathom this vast God, not in this
sermon, not during this week, not in a lifetime.

But let's not let that stop us.