

*If I Only Had a Brain*  
Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Acts 4: 1-22  
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## **I. Introduction**

The book Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West, tells the back story to the Wonderful Wizard of Oz – how, among other things, the Wicked Witch of the West got to be that way. The Witch, who author Gregory Maguire names Elphaba, is a pariah because of the green color of her skin. She is unloved at home and shunned at school.

She also has an unusual character trait that in times of emotional intensity, things seem to happen around her (much like Harry Potter, before he realizes that he’s a wizard). And one of Elphaba’s teachers recognizes this as a sign of latent magical powers and tells her that that gift has the potential to take her to the very heights of power, making her of interest to the great Oz himself. In the musical *Wicked*, she sings a wonderful song (that we’ll hear in a few minutes), called “the Wizard and I,” in which she sings about how being with the Wizard will make her complete and make all her dreams come true. It’s a poignant song because, we all know that the Wizard isn’t really a wizard at all, and has no power to make anyone’s dreams come true; Elphaba is the one with the real power.

One of the central themes that runs through all of the Oz stories is this idea that all of the giftedness that we really need resides in us – often unrecognized or unappreciated – and that our growth as people comes not from changing who we are, but from claiming the gifts that we always have had. This seems a fitting theme to close our month long look at faith lessons that run through The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

## **II. Defined by Lack**

As we have noted in past sermons, the one unifying characteristic of all of Dorothy’s comrades is that they all feel that they’re missing something. The Scarecrow is missing brains, the Tin Woodman is missing a heart, the Lion is lacking courage. And they all identify these things as being “out there,” somewhere outside themselves, things that someone else (like the Wizard) can give them.

They are helpful witnesses to a tendency that we all have to look outside ourselves for the thing that will complete us. Whether it’s an academic degree, the right relationship, enough money; all of us, at one time or another, look outside ourselves for what we need to live rich and

fulfilling lives. The message of the *Wizard of Oz* is that the giftedness that we need to answer God's call is already inside us.

We know more about the prophet Jeremiah than about almost any other figure in the Hebrew Scriptures. He was born of a priestly family and began to prophesy in 626 B.C.E., the same year that Nabopolassar came to the throne of Babylon, and began to change the shape of the ancient Near East. Jeremiah prophesied for 40 years, through the reign of 5 kings of Judah and ultimately saw the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians.

But this morning's passage takes place at the beginning of the book Jeremiah, when he is called by God as a very young man to prophesy. So he has this powerful experience of God, and his first reaction is, "I'm not ready to do this." And so – much like Moses – he responds to God by saying, "Lord, you've got the wrong guy; I'm only a kid." And God responds, "This is not about what you think you might lack; it's about what I have given you and who I have called you to be. Never doubt that."

### **III. Staying Stuck**

Like Jeremiah and Moses, we all find ways of resisting God's call; and Dorothy's companions highlight some of the characteristics that keep us stuck. But they also model how to move beyond those sticking points to embrace God's promises.

#### **A. Scarecrow**

The Scarecrow is the quintessential 21<sup>st</sup> century man. He is absolutely certain that he doesn't have enough knowledge to do what he's created to do: scare crows. Now you could argue that it really doesn't take a lot of brains to scare crows, but the Scarecrow is convinced that it is his lack of brains that is keeping him from being successful. So he quickly joins Dorothy on her journey to the Emerald City in the hope that the great wizard will give him what he lacks.

Ironically, of course, throughout the story of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, the Scarecrow is actually the one who solves most of the challenges that Dorothy and her companions face. Just as in the movie, he usually starts off saying something like, "Well, I'm not too bright about these things, but if you ..." and then he tells the group what has to be done. He never owns the wisdom that he has until it's validated by the wizard, but he does at least act on it.

Scarecrow embodies a dilemma that is discussed at some length in one of my favorite books: Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, by Ed Friedman. Friedman was a rabbi and pastoral counselor who had a deep appreciation for the pervasiveness of anxiety

in our society – an anxiety that keeps us from stepping out and exploring the rich possibilities that God has in store for us. One of the ways that our anxiety keeps us stuck in place is the fear that we don't have enough data to make a good decision.

We live in an information age, when we have more data at our fingertips than our parents could have even conceived of. But rather than that empowering us, it often reduces us to complete immobility because there's always more research we can do, more data we can collect. Friedman calls us "data junkies," because of our obsessive need to collect information before we are willing to make a decision. He argues that – given the amount of data available – we can study any subject indefinitely; but at some point, we need to simply step out and act.

Like the Scarecrow we can allow our perceived lack of knowledge to immobilize us. But the Scarecrow also affirms the promise, that in general we have all of the information we need to make sound decisions. We will inevitably make mistakes, but even mistakes are better than getting mired in inaction.

### ***B. Tin Woodman***

The Tin Woodman says that he has no heart, and he – like the Scarecrow – heads off to Oz so that the Wizard can supply his need. Of course – also like the Scarecrow – he already has what he seeks, and is the most tenderhearted of the group. He steps on a bug at one point in the book and cries until he rusts and keeps his eyes on the ground from that point on for fear of harming another.

I remember the first time that I ever took the Myers-Briggs personality test, where one of the test areas is the spectrum of "thinking" to "feeling." I always saw myself as more of a thinker, but on this test I came out very strongly on the feelings side of the spectrum (as many clergy do). My initial response was, "this test can't be right!" What I eventually realized was that I had very profound feelings, I had just taught myself to not pay attention to them, because they can be hard to deal with.

A lot of us bury our feelings because it's safer or easier or we've been wounded once too many times. But in losing touch with our emotional life, we sometimes become unaware of where our passions are. Pastor and author Fredrick Buechner writes that "call is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." So to know where we're called means knowing where our deepest gladness resides.

I had two conversations this week with folks who were wrestling with job transitions. The first question in that process is what things make you passionate? Where do you get energized? And where does that passion meet the world's need? That's where call happens.

That's also true of our call as a community. As we wrestle with our vision as a congregation, where do we get energized, and where does that energy meet the needs of our world? There are an infinite variety of ministries in which we can get engaged. Where is our passion? That's the question the Tin Woodman asks us.

### *C. Lion*

And finally we come to the Lion, who feels as though he lacks the courage that a real lion needs. He, too, joins the quest; and along the way, is the member of the team who consistently demonstrates the most courage. There's one episode in the book in which they are trying to get across a steep chasm, and the lion volunteers to jump across with each of his companions on his back. In discussing this plan with his friends he says, "I am terribly afraid of falling myself. . . but I suppose there is nothing to do but try it."

The Lion demonstrates the reality that courage is not about not having fear; it is acting despite that fear. Like the Lion, the fear may be in the face of physical harm; but for most of us it is the risk of possible failure. Leadership guru John Maxwell says, "If we're growing, we're always going to be out of our comfort zone." God doesn't call us to the comfortable and familiar. When you look at God's call in Holy Scripture, it's always a call that moves us from where we are into a new world that we can hardly imagine. It's a call to leave our nets and follow; it's a call to throw off shackles and move to freedom in the desert.

Author and activist Anna Lappe, says "Courage is saying, 'Maybe what I'm doing isn't working; maybe I should try something else.'" All of us get to points in our lives when we realize that something we're doing isn't working and we've got to try something else. That's why when someone in a church says "we've never done it that way," that's a point in its favor, in my way of thinking. Doing the same thing is always easier, but courage calls us to jump the ravine to get to a better place.

## **IV. Conclusion – Back to Kansas**

Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion all have something to teach us about moving into the future with power and grace. They teach us that the gifts that we are looking for as we seek a rich and fulfilling life – as we seek to answer God's call – reside within us and we need to claim them. We need to not obsess about having all the data that we think we might need before we act. We need to be in touch with our feelings and where our passions lie. And sometimes we just need to courage to jump.

Those same traits are also true for us as a community. We have some significant issues before us as a church. How do we keep focused on our vision as a church in light of our

cooperative parish structure? How should we respond to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who are going to want to marry? Tough issues, but issues that we have the giftedness to face together and to resolve in a way that will leave us stronger as a community. Where does our passion as a community meet the needs of the world?

In our reading from the Book of Acts, what mystifies the Jewish leaders on the Sanhedrin is that Peter and John are “uneducated and ordinary men.” “How could these peasant fisherman,” they said to themselves, “stand before the council of learned elders and speak with such authority?” Well they could do it because they knew that God was speaking through them, and had given them the gifts they needed to engage the world around them. For people of faith, fear can never triumph; the power of God’s grace always has the last word.

Amen.