

The Power of God's Call

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

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.”

A PROPHET TO THE NATIONS

A person who wasn't a Christian had a question for a minister. He asked,
“Why did God choose the Jews to be his people? Why didn't he choose,
for example, the Chinese or the Germans or some other nation?”

How would you answer that question?

Out of all the people in the world why would God choose the Jews to be his
chosen people?

A British journalist once put it this way,

“How odd of God to choose the Jews.”

Was it odd for God to choose the Jews?

One person responded to this antisemitic limerick by saying, "How strange of man to change the plan."

And another emphasized the irony of those who would be Christians and yet treat Jews badly, "Not odd of God, his son was one."

A Jewish rabbi once told me, "Jews were not chosen for special privilege. We were chosen for special service." God had a job for them to do.

I believe that's true. I believe the Jews were chosen for special service. They were chosen to bring God's message of love and justice to the world.

As God told Abraham, through his offspring, "all the nations of the world would be blessed".

The call of the Jews to be God's people is an example of how God works in the world.

God calls people to bring God's message to the world, a message of justice and grace. And God chooses to bring this message through the ministry of ordinary human beings.

Notice that in our lesson for today Jeremiah is not just called to be a prophet for Israel.

He is called to be a "prophet to the nations."
God is not just the God of Judah.
God is the God of the whole world.

This is a word of caution for those who think that God's election gives one nation or one religious group priority over others.

The call of God's prophet was a Word of love and justice for all people. God merely used a specific human being, Jeremiah, to make that Word known.

A PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE

And God still does that.
Jesus calls us just as he called disciples long ago.

I like the way the folks in Campus Crusade for Christ used to put it.
 “God loves you, and has a plan for your life.”

Do you believe that?

Do you believe that God loves you and has a plan for your life? Do you believe God can take very flawed people and use them as servants for the Kingdom of God?

Do you believe that it is possible that God is calling you today?

Sometimes we are rather shortsighted in our evaluation of people.
 We look on the outside.

But, our Scripture for today tells us that God looks at people in a different way.

God looks on the inside.

God sees potential where we see only problems.

God is able to use the most unlikely of people for the glory of his kingdom.

God is even able to use people like you and me.

I believe that God made each and every one of us for a purpose. We have a job to do. We have a special call.

But, we are not always willing to accept or believe that.

SET APART

Did you hear how the call of Jeremiah was described?

God said, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Jeremiah was holy.

That is, Jeremiah was “set apart” for a specific task.

It’s the same word used when they talked about the tabernacle and its furnishings.

Just as God’s house was holy, set apart for a specific purpose, so Jeremiah’s life was holy.

From the very beginning God had a plan for Jeremiah’s life.

In fact before he was even born God knew that he was going to be his spokesman.

Many young couples when they are expecting a child have plans for that child.

For example a father might proudly say, "My son is going to be a famous football player."

A mother might say, "My daughter is going to be a famous concert pianist."

But, of course we know that these plans are only wishful thinking.

We can't determine what our children will be.

But, this passage suggests that this is not true with God. God had a plan for Jeremiah's life before he was even born.

Jeremiah's life would not be about him and what he wanted to do.

Jeremiah's life would be about the message that God would speak through him.

Jeremiah would be God's mouthpiece.

NO EXCUSE

How would you respond if someone told you that your life had been planned for you before you were even born? And suppose your calling in life would be a job that would be dangerous and thankless?

How would you react to that?

I suspect that you would react the same way that Jeremiah reacted. You would begin to offer excuses as to why you couldn't do that job.

Jeremiah said,

"Lord, I haven't had a chance to go to college and take a speech class. How in the world can you expect me to be your spokesman?"

Besides, I'm too young to do this job. I'm just a teenager."

Jeremiah was very young when he received God's call.
His excuse was a valid one.
He didn't have any experience.
Probably older people would not take him seriously.

His resume was nonexistent at this point.
And so Jeremiah said, "I am only a child."
But, that was no excuse when it came to the call of God.

Unfortunately, I can't use youth and inexperience as an excuse any more,
but I have other excuses at the ready whenever I think that God is pushing
me to do a job that I don't want to do. Instead of saying I'm too young and
inexperienced; I say that I'm too old and tired.

I say something like,
"You need a young person to do a job like that, God.
Haven't you made a mistake when you tapped me for this task?"

What's your excuse when it comes to the call of God?

I hate to tell you this.
With God's call there is no minimum or maximum age limit. None of us are
too old or too young to be called.

None of us can claim inexperience as an excuse.
The call of God is not about us.
It's about God's choice.

And as old Abraham and young Jeremiah found out, God won't take "no"
for an answer.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

That being said, we should by no means underestimate the difficulty of
what God was calling Jeremiah to do. Jeremiah's task was a particularly
difficult one.

God called him to preach a message of judgment to corrupt leaders and an
unjust society.

At first Jeremiah called for his people to repent and turn from their wicked ways.

But, then it became apparent that the time for repentance had past and God's people would suffer the punishment of the Exile.

Jeremiah proclaimed this message at great personal cost.

He did not have a normal social or family life.

He was beaten and imprisoned. There were plots against his life.

Jeremiah was a sensitive soul who understood and bemoaned the agony that his people must endure. And yet, Jeremiah was also quite aware of the passion of God against the sin of the people.

To put it another way, Jeremiah was caught between a rock and a hard place, and he will complain bitterly to God about this. And yet out of this great struggle there will come the assurance that God will finally save them. (For example, see Jeremiah 15:19-21)

Even as Jeremiah and his people were being taken into captivity, the prophet preached a message of restoration. God would not abandon his people. God would one day bring them home. The covenant would be re-established by God's mercy.

When we look at the great call stories in the Bible, see that God does call people (sometimes very flawed people) to do his will. But, the call does not bring special privilege. Quite the contrary, God's call often involves great personal sacrifice and loss.

No wonder Moses suggested that he was not a good speaker, when God called him to tell Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth at the time, to let God's people go. The odds of surviving such an encounter did not seem so good.

No wonder Isaiah, when confronted with the holiness of God in the temple felt like a man of unclean lips who lived among a people of unclean lips. How could a sinful man like him bring God's word to the people?

No one is worthy of God's call. And God's call does certainly not bring special privilege.

But, through the struggles of people like Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and many others, God told a story of justice and love that is still being told today.

These prophets offered the opportunity to repent and go back home. And that same opportunity is being offered to us today.

THE SAME STORY

I like to watch a show on HGTV called Flip or Flop.

It's about a young couple who buys distressed properties, rehabs them and hopefully sells them at a profit.

The houses are different, but every show is much the same.

1. They buy a house and pay too much.
2. The house has way more problems they first thought, and it looks like they are going to lose their shirt.
3. But, through hard work and luck they usually sell the house for a profit.

It seems to me that many of the stories in the Bible also follow the same plot.

1. The people reject God's covenant of grace.
2. The prophet warns the people to repent, but the people don't repent and suffer the consequences.
3. Finally, God's grace prevails and the people are delivered in some way.

They make it out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. Their enemies are defeated. They return home from exile.

And then the cycle starts all over again.

Through their very human and flawed stories we learn over and over again about the love and justice of God. The Bible tells us that God's people are slow learners.

No matter how many times they read the story they keep making the same mistakes.

Jesus lamented the stubborn ways of God's people outside of Jerusalem when he said,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34)

That's why Jeremiah wanted to escape the call of God. He understood the sacrifice he was being called to make. He has seen this TV show before, and it is not a happy ending.

We saw this theme in our lesson last week when Jesus preached in Nazareth. Prophets are not well received in their own home town because they bring a message that requires us to change our ways.

And we just don't want to do it.

We don't want to repent and live under the shelter of God's grace. We are not willing.

You see, the reason God choose the Jews is that their story is our story.

We too are called by God, but we reject that call.

We reject God's love and justice.

We refuse to learn the lesson of exile, and we do not return to the gracious home that God would provide for us.

Indeed, when God sent his Son into the world to save the world, what did we do?

We not only rejected him; we crucified him.

That's the story of God's chosen people.

That's our story.

A STORY OF JUDGMENT AND RENEWAL

But, of course that's not the end of the story.

In the case of Jesus grace triumphed over even the grave.

On the third day it was death that was defeated.
Hope prevailed in Jerusalem despite the cross.
And hope can and does prevail in our life as well.

Notice what God is calling Jeremiah to do.
He is called to “pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”
What does that mean?

The call of Jeremiah teaches us that in order to plant you have to plow under the remainder of last year’s crop. In order to build something new you sometimes have to tear down the old and dilapidated.

We live in a different time and place, but the message God gave Jeremiah is still relevant to us today.

We too are called to embrace a salvation that comes first through tearing down and plucking up. In order to embrace the kingdom of God, we have to be willing to leave the old life behind.

If we (like the prophets of Jeremiah’s day) say “all is well” when all is not well, we are not true to the word that God has given us. God does indeed come to judge our evil ways.

But, God does not destroy for the sake of destroying.
God destroys in order to build up.

This is the continuing story of God’s people.
When we work for justice, we have the opportunity to build a new kingdom.
When we pluck up the old crop, a new plant can bloom.

This is the challenging and hopeful message that God brings through the prophet.
And it is this message that God also brings to us.

Jeremiah did not see the exile as a bad thing.
Jeremiah saw it as the first step in rebuilding a nation based upon the love and justice of God.

In fact, as we've noted, when the exile began, Jeremiah's message shifted radically.

It became a message of building and planting instead of tearing down and plucking up.

Through the courageous message of Jeremiah, God's people were given the resources they needed to weather the storm of exile. The exile was a time when God's people re-evaluated what it meant to be God's people.

The exile was a time when the way was prepared not only for a trip home to the Promised Land but also the ministry of God's Son, Jesus.

THE PROMISE OF PRESENCE

I believe that Jeremiah probably didn't know the full impact of his ministry. By and large his ministry was filled with the tears and struggle and rejection.

He probably didn't live to see the building and the planting. He only saw the sadness and destruction. I bet he wondered if his message of hope was just wishful thinking.

But, from our perspective we know that his ministry was extremely effective.

The prophet who was so despised and rejected in his time left a message that helped God's people rebuild and understand the true nature of God's call. Many of the prophet's words formed a basis for the new covenant of grace established by the ministry of Jesus.

Indeed the words of the prophet are alluded to in the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper celebrates the "new covenant" (or the new testament) in the blood of Christ that is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. (See Jeremiah 31:31, Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:25)

The power of God's call was greater than the prophet could ever imagine. And God's call to us is more powerful than we can imagine.

God does indeed love us, and God does have a plan for our life. God is calling us to go in his name.

But, we have to go to that new place without the help of Google maps.

That's how it was for Abraham whom God called to go to the place that he would show him. And that's how it is for us as well.

God has not promised that the road will be easy or obvious.

But, God has promised to be with us on the journey.

The Lord told Jeremiah not to be afraid. God would be with him and would deliver him. God told Moses the same thing. (Exodus 3:12)

And Jesus told his disciples before his ascension,
"I am with you always even until the end of the age."

We do not fear because we believe in the presence of God. God is with us and for us. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "If God is for us, who is against us?"

That's the power of God's call.

God's call to serve comes with the promise of presence.

In my own life I have learned (and forgotten) this lesson over and over again.

It's the same plot in different settings.

I am often unfaithful, but God's love is always steadfast.

That's what a young Jeremiah learned and relearned all his life. Through all the struggles and disappointments, God was there.

The book that follows Jeremiah is the book of Lamentations. It's sometimes referred to as the Lamentations of Jeremiah.

We're not sure that Jeremiah wrote this book, but it sure seems to fit with what went on in his life.

You see, Lamentations is a funeral liturgy.

It laments the fact that God's people have been taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

But, right in the middle of that funeral dirge is this verse,
“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.”

You might recognize the beloved hymn that is based on this, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.”
“All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!”

In the middle of our exile God invites us to trust in the power of His gracious call.

God help us learn to have faith for the journey.

Amen.