

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 3, 2013
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 1:1-10
Psalm 71:1-17
I Corinthians 14:12-20
Luke 4:21-30

It is probably not a coincidence that our Gospel lesson, which tells us of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, is paired today with the Old Testament lesson, which tells the story of Jeremiah's call to be a prophet.

These lessons remind us that Jesus' ministry stands in *continuity* with the ministry of the prophets. But they do more. For in hearing these lessons, especially the experience of Jeremiah, each of us has the opportunity to reflect upon our own *personal* response to God's call in our lives.

I want to focus most of our attention this morning on Jeremiah, drawing parallels between his experience and our own. Then we will try to connect what we see with the Gospel lesson and Jesus' experience at the synagogue in Nazareth.

The parallels between Jeremiah and us can be stated, I believe, in the form of simple affirmations. And yet, if we take these to heart, they can be powerful and life changing. For they are truths that are true not merely of Jeremiah, but of each of us.

The first truth is simply this: *You are intimately known by God, and have been since before you were in your mother's womb.*

There are no accidents in the plan of God. You were not an “afterthought” in God’s mind. Your parents may not have planned for you or wanted you -- but God did. The world may not take you seriously, but God does.

We live in a “functional” society, where we evaluate our worth and our self-worth based upon our ability to contribute functionally to society. But God doesn’t work that way. Your worth and your self-worth are not calculated based on your functional contribution to society.

You are precious and valuable today not because of what you can *do*, but because God made you and created you. You are precious and valuable today because you were born in the mind of God long before you were born in your mother’s womb. Long before you made your grand entrance onto this stage we call life, God knew you and God planned for your arrival. *You are a product of God’s creative love.*

Whether you acknowledge it or not, you are here on the planet by divine design. Every step you’ve ever taken, every fear you’ve ever encountered, every mistake you’ve ever made, every dream you’ve ever hidden away in your heart, every success you’ve ever attained, is known more deeply by God than by you. Your life matters today because your life began in the heart and mind of God long before it began in the hearts and minds of your parents.

Now because of this truth, a second truth follows from it: *You are called by God for a special purpose.* If God planned for you and knows you, that means God has a special purpose for your life. You may not be called to be a prophet, like Jeremiah, but God has a purpose for your life.

In this world of self-help gurus, we are often told that “we can be anything we want to be.”

I admire the motive behind this, and I believe it is quite noble. But it is not always true. I could stand here today and say that I wanted to be a professional football player. I could tell you how my dream in life is to play in the Super Bowl. But genetics were not good to me in this area, and my size and shape make it obvious that I will never play in the NFL.

If we are honest, we will admit today that we cannot always be “anything” we want to be. But guess what: We *can* be everything *God* wants us to be. We can fulfill his purpose for our life. This is true, in spite of what we may think.

Too often we struggle with the notion that God has a special purpose for our life. And we are not alone. Take a look through the Bible. Jeremiah, Moses, Gideon, Paul -- almost all people in the Bible who are called of God struggle with the fact that God could use them to do something special.

Some of their struggles we have claimed for ourselves:

“I’m too old”

“I’m too young”

“I’m not smart enough”
“I’m not an effective speaker”
“I’m not talented enough”
“Compared to _____, I’m inadequate”
“I’m not experienced enough”
“I’ve never done anything like this before”

I wonder if the human part of Jesus ever asserted itself in his mind and said, “I’m not sure if I’m up to what the Father has asked of me.”

We can’t know that for sure. But to all of *our* concerns, doubts and objections, God simply says: “My child, this is not about *you*; it’s about *me*.” I will help you; I will teach you; I will show you; I will be with you.

You are uniquely known by God. And because of that you are called of God to take your place in the world, and to be everything God created you to be.

I’m not sure what that may mean for you today. But I know this. God only asks you to be yourself. God doesn’t require that you be like someone else. God only asks you to be *you*.

Which leads to our third affirmation of truth from Jeremiah’s experience:
God will help you to fulfill his call on your life by giving you a special touch.

The old cliché is trite, but true: God’s will for your life will never take you where his grace cannot keep you. We need not be afraid of circumstances *around* us or fears *within* us. For God has promised to be with us, and to go with us. He has promised to equip us, to help us, to empower us.

This is particularly good news, because as both Jeremiah and Jesus learned, the path to becoming all that God wants us to be is sometimes fraught with opposition, obstacles, and setbacks. The road is seldom smooth and straight. Epiphany can have its dark side, for anytime we choose to embrace the light and to live in the light, the darkness will oppose us.

But we needn't fear. For as the Psalmist reminds us this morning, God is near to us, and from our mother's womb he has sustained us and been our strength.

Let me ask you this morning: Have you ever considered that God has a special purpose for your life? That God has a special place for you? That God has known you and planned for you long before you were born so that you might bless the world simply by being you?

It's true. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, come to God with gratitude that you were in his mind long before you ever heard his Name. As you come, lay aside the burden of trying to be like someone else, or of trying to be who you think others *think* you should be. Come as you are. Come as *you*. Come and yield your life anew to his plan for *your* life, and receive the touch of his grace.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.