

“CHOOSING A VOCATION”

Jeremiah 1:4-10 February 2, 2025

Once there was a patient at a dentist's office who tried to lighten her fear of having her teeth worked on by listing her middle name as "**Wimp.**" A little later the receptionist stepped into the waiting room and said, "**The doctor will now see the wimp.**" Four people got up.

On a more serious note. Back in 1994 **Bomb The Suburbs** was published as a collection of essays, by William Upsi Wimsatt, a former graffiti tagger and activist. William bet his life on the fact that "**America is becoming a nation based on fear ... and that fear is destroying everything that's good about us, our democracy, our diversity, our freedom.**"

He calls his project "**Bet with America.**" The bet goes like this: He decided to hitchhike across America through the neighborhoods where no one would think of going in the day, much less at night. "If I get killed, I lose the bet. If I win, you have to consider what I'm saying. I believe that running away from people we fear most--what I call the suburban mentality--is the source of America's deepest problems, from the mediocrity of our schools to the decline of our press."

He traveled to Cleveland, Pittsburgh, D.C., Baltimore, Philly, New York and Boston. "I accept rides from anyone who stops and never ask to get out of the car unless I have to go to the bathroom. Every city I get to, I head straight for the public housing projects, walk through the courts, cut across abandoned lots or head down whatever streets or

alleys seem the scariest to me. Conventional wisdom says I should have been killed dozens of times by now, but the only crime that's happened to me so far is this: **A white girl from Monroeville, a suburb of Pittsburgh, stole my diary and some jeans out of my bag as souvenirs."**

Facing our fears is never easy, but then again, going through life in a constant state of fear is not easy either. Fear is an emotion that serves to warn and keep us safe from potentially dangerous situations. It is wise to notice the things that make us afraid. It might save our life. But, we also know that our fears can be irrational, which we usually label as phobias. Fear of heights, fear of death, fear of certain animals, fear of failure, and fear of public speaking are just a few examples. Irrational fear becomes dangerous when it fuels our prejudices and politics.

This morning's scripture reading has some fear. The youthful Jeremiah has a God encounter, the first of many. At first glance it doesn't sound all that intimidating. Jeremiah does not go into great detail. He simply says, "**Now the word of the Lord came to me...**" We aren't told any visual information, where Jeremiah was, what God's voice sounded like, or even how he knew it was God speaking to him. Yet, I would venture to say Jeremiah's anxiety level and heartrate went up a few notches. Whose wouldn't? It would be a natural human reaction to encountering the mystery of God.

But what God said next really activated Jeremiah's phobias. "**I appointed you a prophet to the nations.**" In reaction, Jeremiah cries out,

“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” To comprehend the gravity of this moment and Jeremiah’s overwhelming fear, we need to understand the work of a prophet.

I. THE SUMMONS

First, being a prophet is not something one aspires to. If you ask any child what do you want to be when you grow up, I guarantee none of them will say, **“I want to be a prophet.”** Fireman, nurse, teacher, scientist, maybe but not a prophet! There are no college courses, master’s degree programs, or books on how to be a prophet. There are no family businesses raising their children to be prophets. Why? Because it is not a job anyone wants or trains for. It is not a career path. It is not an occupation you choose, but rather one that you are **summoned** to. No one in their right mind appoints themselves a prophet. It is God who does the appointing.

Hence, we can understand Jeremiah’s fear and trepidation. Even though he is the son of a priest, being a prophet was not in his life plan. So in typical call story fashion, he comes up with a list of excuses. God I am not a good public speaker, one of the big phobias for many people. I am too young, I have no experience, I don’t want to look foolish in front of other people. God you’re making a mistake. You’ve got the wrong guy!

Now arguing with God and making excuses doesn’t work. To paraphrase, God tells Jeremiah, **“Nonsense. You’re going to go to all I send you to and speak to all I tell you to.”**

II. CHOICES

This exchange might bother our modern ears. It sounds like Jeremiah doesn't have any choice. What happened to free will? Is this some form of fate or predestination? How do we understand the uncompromising nature of God's call on Jeremiah?

A. Think of it this way. Have you ever met someone who just seemed born for their occupation? Can you imagine Mozart being anything other than a musician and composer or Michelangelo not being an artist? We might say, "**That boy has baseball is in their blood**" or "**I could never imagine myself being anything else than a doctor.**" You have all probably met people who from a very young age knew exactly what they were made to be and pursued that career. God seems to be saying this to Jeremiah. "**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you;**"

B. Then there are the rest of us who may still be searching for our calling and purpose in life because it has little to do with our choice of occupation. Because of circumstances and availability our work options might have been limited. If coal mining is the only option for making a living, then you work in the mine. Maybe we had to quit school to support a sick parent. Even if we love sports we might not be gifted athletically.

Here's the thing, even if we don't have a call event like Jeremiah, as followers of the living God, we have all been summoned to God's ideals for human life. To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. No matter what our job is we are called to live out justice and compassion. We all have gifts to share in God's kingdom work.

While it might not be obvious, Jeremiah does have a choice. He could have said “NO” to God, Lord knows many of us have, but Jeremiah would have been all the lessor for it because he would not have lived fully into his purpose. When God intrudes – life takes on new meaning. The Summons – sets in motion a whole new life for Jeremiah. Through it he discovers who he is and his purpose in life.

The same thing happens in baptism, our lives take on a whole new meaning and we are never the same again. We die to an old way of living and view of the world, and rise to a new way of living and viewing the world, as a blessed child of the living God, forgiven, redeemed, loved, called and sent. However, living out our baptism and calling is not easy, and most prophets did not fair well.

III. DESTRUCTION AND BUILDING

I like to watch some of those **home improvement shows**, especially the ones that work with average people and ordinary incomes. I am captured by the imagination and talent of people who can turn a plain old, even shabby looking home into an attractive and inviting, yet practical living space. Some of the changes are so simple and even a DIY could handle it. Over the years I have noticed that in every one of these shows, the construction crew has to tear something down or take something apart to make way for something new. The demolition was as important as a new countertop. People did not get a new house without making some changes.

The Lord tells Jeremiah, “**See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.**” Notice first that Jeremiah is a prophet not just to Israel but the world. Secondly, notice there are two opposite parts to Jeremiah’s work, namely pulling down and building up, destroying and planting.

The hardest task for most individuals, churches, businesses, and countries, is to tear something down. We love to hold on to what we know, even when it is not best for us to do so. Even when God is calling us to a new vision and adventure that would offer new life, we refuse to let go. Sometimes, good memories get in the way of new futures.

One of the truths about our walk of faith is that if you want to follow Jesus you cannot stay the same. There will be some plucking up and pulling down. Just like gardening – we have to pluck the weeds, and till the ground, to make space for new plants. So it is with our spiritual life and walk with Jesus.

Will we dare to ask ourselves some tough spiritual questions? God what needs overthrown in my life so that I might draw closer to you and serve you better? God what goals do you want me to tackle? What temptations are we still putting up with? What new adventures do you want to plant in my life?

Will we dare to ask God about our church? Is it time to let a program go, hopefully not the pastor, but...what new ministry is God planting among us and our community? How are we addressing the needs of the

world? What might we need to speak against? What are we afraid of? What gifts are we not utilizing? What is giving us energy and renewal and life? What is draining those things away? When we explore these questions and engage the world, we begin to realize that God has summoned us to be the body of Christ in the world. That responsibility can feel rather scary and overwhelming, but there is some good news.

III. REASSURANCE.

“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord. 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.”

Jeremiah would go on to face some scary stuff. At first, he is speaking to the nation of Judah that is about to be destroyed by the Babylonians and then he is speaking to the survivors of that destruction who are living in exile and wondering why they are suffering if they are the chosen people. At first Jeremiah is warning the people about the destruction to come if they continue on their current path, then he is offering hope to depressed and defeated people. This is no easy task, and his words were not always welcome and at one point got Jeremiah thrown into a pit. It's not good to criticize your nation even if they need to hear God's truth.

How did Jeremiah hold up under it all? He had God's backing and promises.

1. **Appointed and Consecrated** – He was a man set aside or apart for God’s purposes. He did not work by his own authority but the Lord’s. Any doubt gets swept away.
2. **I am with you** – God’s presence filled his life. God’s nature was living in him. One cannot do the job of prophet in your own power and wisdom.
3. **Touch my mouth** – God equips Jeremiah with God’s word, not his own. The main role of prophet not as a fortune teller but that of a forth teller. Jeremiah didn’t have to be clever or brilliant or wise, just faithful and trusting and share what he was given.
4. **Deliverance** – God promises to protect and deliver Jeremiah from evil.

These promises of God reassured Jeremiah that he was never alone, but always in God’s care. It didn’t mean it was easy to follow the Lord, but that he was God enabled to follow. Jeremiah reminds us that following Christ is not a popularity contest. If everyone likes us we are probably not following Jesus. If we are always accepted, always received, always agreed with, always comfortable and never afraid we probably not on the path of Christ. This doesn’t mean we have to be rude, obnoxious, or go out of our way to be disagreeable. It just means when we shine God’s light on the values of the world we are bound to get a negative reaction. As John writes in his Gospel, **“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light**

because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”

This past week I had lunch with our General Presbyter, Rev. Denise Pass. During our conversation she said, “There are many organizations that serve those in need better than the church. But there is one thing the world needs that we do better – we share the word of grace. We have the prophetic word of mercy, justice, and peace. The powers of this world won’t want to hear those words. Say them anyway. Know that the Lord God has formed us, consecrated us, appointed us, dwells in us, delivers us, and empowers us. We are not alone. So what are we afraid of? Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, February 2, 2025

Second Scripture Lesson

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴Now 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.” ⁶Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” ⁷But 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, ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” ⁹Then 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. ¹⁰See, 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.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.