

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
February 3, 2019
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Jeremiah 1:4-10 The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

5 “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.”

6 “Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

7 But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. **8** Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.

9 Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. **10** See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

“Even a Child Can Do It”

Grandma calls from the kitchen: “Can you come in here please to help me?” Her grandson puts down the video game controller and appears in front of his nana. She holds out her hand and gives him a plastic bottle. “It’s this darn child proof cap,” she tells him. In five seconds, he’s got it off and hands it back to her. She smiles at him, says thank you, and lets out a sigh. Children might actually have an easier time with prescriptions than fingers gripped by arthritis. Some things are designed to be too tough for them. But children might actually be better equipped than those of us with a few decades under our belts. God has a calling, a purpose for life that sounds too challenging, too difficult for someone without training and experience. But Jeremiah shows us God has solutions to excuses. In the way God calls and equips his people, even a child can do it. We might even say especially a child can do it.

1) Jeremiah’s Call

First of all, we want to be clear that God is calling Jeremiah to some challenging work. We don’t want to sugarcoat things. God first comes to Jeremiah and says: **“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 1:5) God comes to Jeremiah and gives him the task of being his messenger. One of the unique things about Jeremiah is how much personal information we learn about him in Scripture. Some prophets we only get their names and home towns. But the Book of Jeremiah shows us what Jeremiah does and what happens to him over his 40 year ministry. And it wasn’t always pretty. Jeremiah had a difficult mission from God and it took a very personal toll on him.

This was a politically and spiritually dangerous time in Israel’s history. Jeremiah’s calling came during the 13th year of King Josiah (Jeremiah 1:2). Josiah was the last good king in Israel’s history. His father, Manasseh, had been one of the absolute worst kings. Other kings allowed idolatry to take place in their kingdom. Manasseh embraced evil and promoted the

worship forms of idolatry. Josiah was able to bring about significant reforms in the nation. He was especially helped by the discovery of the Bible in the temple. That help you realize how bad things had gotten.

But it was hard to tell if those reforms initiated by Jeremiah really changed the hearts of people or they were just going through the motions. During this time the Israelites were constantly on the look out for outside help with political power. Egypt was strong. But the Assyrians to the north were looking more powerful. Where would they turn for help? God's biggest purpose in sending Jeremiah was to help the people to look to him instead of foreign powers for help. God wanted change of heart instead of changing alliances.

So we want to be realistic that Jeremiah had a challenging calling. It was intimidating to carry out what God was asking him to do. It would be hard to measure his success.

2) Jeremiah's Response

That's why it's understandable that Jeremiah responds the way he does. He says: "**Alas, Sovereign Lord...I do not know how to speak; I am too young.**" (Jeremiah 1:6) It's hard to tell how serious Jeremiah was. He is basically saying "I'm only a boy." In Hebrew, the word Jeremiah uses could refer to anyone who just quit taking a bottle as a toddler all the way to someone of marriageable age in young manhood. Maybe he was exaggerating. Maybe he wasn't. But he sure didn't feel qualified to do what God was asking him to do.

There are times when our employers give unusual benefits. Some companies, as a way to show they care about the people who work for them, offer a life insurance policy even if the job isn't particularly dangerous. But along with that benefit comes scrutiny. Before the insurance company will write the policy, you have to go to the doctor for a thorough examination. I've even heard of some companies that offer high level promotions but only after you've gone through a barrage of psychological tests. It can be a little intimidating. Those tests will be able to tell if you've had a cigarette in the past 3 months. They will show that your blood pressure is a little too high, you carry around a few extra pounds, you are on the borderline for diabetes.

And so when God comes to any of us and calls us to a special duty and gives us special responsibilities, it's easy to think up excuses. I don't want the humiliation of going through that level of scrutiny. I don't need anyone pointing out my flaws and failures. I want to live my own life. It's not really anyone else's business what's going on with my life.

We can even be honest. When it comes to doing something important for God, we don't feel qualified. We don't have the education or experience or natural personality strengths to do what God is asking. We can point out some of our strengths that God should appreciate. We can point to the service we are already doing for God that he should be grateful for. We can highlight the risks we typically take in our faith and the generosity we already exhibit with our time and gifts.

If we are honest and realistic though, there are plenty of valid-sounding reasons to say no to God. One writer has described this modern condition of trying to be independent and free

by controlling our lives as “bleak business.”¹ Instead of finding lives of freedom and happiness, we find ourselves living trivial, insignificant lives.

3) God’s Work in Jeremiah’s Heart

God had a gentle rebuke and reprimand for Jeremiah: **“Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.”** (Jeremiah 1:7) But notice he didn’t give him a pep talk to redirect his attention. Instead he said: **“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you.”** (Jeremiah 1:8) God calls and God empowers.

In fact, the message God called Jeremiah to share with Israel was the message Jeremiah most needed to hear. What he was appointed to tell other people was the message he needed to take to heart. God told him: **“See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”** (Jeremiah 1:10) God needed to get to the root of Jeremiah’s excuses and uproot the focus on his own heart that made him say he couldn’t do it. God saw the reasons Jeremiah had built up in his heart why he was so unqualified and God needed to tear them down. God saw all the inadequacies that stood as barriers for Jeremiah and needed to be destroyed. God saw that it was primarily a desire for an easier more stress-free life that Jeremiah uses to give answer to God’s call and God needed to do a demolition. God had to do this painful and uncomfortable work so he could start building and planting.

Have you noticed getting a lot more spam phone calls lately? It’s not just you. A new report says there were an astounding 26.3 billion robocalls in the United States in 2018. That’s an increase of 46 over the previous year.² The result is that we don’t pick up the phone. At least not unless we recognize the number. Over 51% of phone calls went unanswered last year.

The truth is we all like to have control. We like to have control over who has access to us, what kinds of messages reach us. Then we like to be able to decide how we are going to respond. That’s part of being human. God’s calling to Jeremiah shows he doesn’t look for perfect people to carry out his work. God doesn’t choose the most qualified. God calls and equips. God’s call empower and God’s Word qualifies. With God doing the work through his servants, it’s something even a child can do. When we realize the top component for success is humility in the face of God’s call, especially a child can do.

4) Your Baptismal Call

Jeremiah was an extraordinary prophet who lived in an extraordinary time in Israel’s history. And yet God says the same thing to you as he said to Jeremiah: **“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.”** (Jeremiah 1:5) Your baptism is the proof that God chose you. No matter how you feel about yourself on any

¹ Peterson, Eugene H. Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best. Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press; 2009, p.14. Quoting Tom Howard.

² Emily Price. “Robocalls Are Getting Worse and Scammers Are Making Money Off Them.” Fortune. Accessed <http://fortune.com/2019/01/30/robocalls-spam-calls-increasing/>

given day, your baptism is proof that you are a child of God. No matter what anyone else thinks about you or says to you, your baptism is a solid sign and guarantee that you have been wrapped in the robe's of Christ's righteousness. No matter what happens to you in life, your baptism is a promise that your heavenly Father's inheritance is waiting for you.

Through baptism and through faith in Jesus, you are called and you are equipped. The word God uses in Jeremiah 1:5 can be a bit tricky. Some Bible translations use the words "I have consecrated you" (ESV) or "I have sanctified you" (NKJV). In your bulletin it reads "**I have set you apart,**" which is just as good. But in the Old Testament it is a label attached to special equipment used in the temple or tabernacle or the specially designated people who serve as priests and prophets. You can think of it as being set aside for holy purposes. It means Jeremiah doesn't have to come up with his own purpose in life or look at his own abilities or determine his own way in the world. God called him and God directs his life.

One of the hardest thing a child deals with or at least fears, is being the last one standing on the playground after the teams have been picked for kickball or baseball or basketball. It's a horrible because you feel like you are not good enough, people don't see you as valuable enough to want you on their team, they would be better off without you.

But God doesn't see you that way. To God you aren't a zero. You are never a nobody. God says to you what he says to Jeremiah. God crafted and fashioned you. God calls you to a life of faith and gives you a holy purpose. God doesn't try to boost your self-esteem by telling you how good you are. He doesn't guarantee success and happiness based on fulfilling all your life's goals. God calls you away from trying to live for yourself and by your own standards. God calls you to live a life of faith. God set you apart for his holy purposes. You have a place in God's plans only you can fill. And only you can fill it. You were picked and assigned to God's team.

5) God's equipping and gifting

That doesn't necessarily mean Jeremiah had an easy prophetic ministry. His life was difficult. A few times his life was in danger because of his faithfulness to the Lord. But God had given him this promise: "**Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you.**" (Jeremiah 1:8) The God who called Jeremiah also promised to be present with him. The God who put him in risky situations guaranteed his rescue. God's presence will provide the basis for his work. Jeremiah just needed to trust God to provide for him in every situation.

Jeremiah gives us a glimpse into an even greater prophet. In Luke chapter 4 we learn about the difficult ministry Jesus carried out. He spoke and carried out his work even when it wasn't popular or easy. But Jesus did it so his life could be the ultimate rescue for every person called by God. Jesus was set apart for the holy purpose of being your Rescuer. The unwavering faithfulness of Jesus takes away every excuse of sin, every inadequacy of your failure and covers over the weaknesses in your personality or character.

Have you ever noticed that children make natural missionaries? I think it's because they have no filters. If they think it, they say it. 'Mommy, why does that lady have blue hair?'

'Daddy why does that guy have tattoos on his face?' But if they hear someone doesn't go to church, they immediately tell them they should. If they learn someone doesn't celebrate Jesus at Christmas, they immediately tell them their Sunday school story about Jesus' birth.

God calls and empowers you through his word. Just as he said to Jeremiah, he says to you: **"I have put my words in your mouth."** (Jeremiah 1:9) Recognizing your sins and inadequacies, God tells you: **"But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."** (1 Corinthians 6:11) When you feel beaten down and defeated, Jesus says to you: **"Take and eat; this is my body...Drink from it, all of you."** (Matthew 26:26,27) God's word comes to change you from the inside out. God's Word reorients your life to look at his purposes instead of your excuses. God's Word redefines your identity. Embracing God's Word transforms you to become what God has called you to be.

We sometimes think we can't be prophets like Jeremiah. But biblical prophecy is basically relaying to others God's Word that we ourselves have received. And just like crops can't be planted until the fields are cleared and construction can't begin until the decrepit past is hauled away, God uses his word to build and plant. That's something even a child can do. With humble, childlike trust in God, empowered by his call and equipped through his Word, it's something especially you can do. Amen.