

4th SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

January 31, 2016

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Called

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

The prophet Jeremiah lived in the period leading up to the Babylonian Captivity, when their country was destroyed, and the Jews were led off in chains to a faraway land in 587 B.C.

It was a chaotic time, and the people of Israel were questioning established religious beliefs, and turning away from the God of Israel to worship other gods.

So it was to be expected that the prophet Jeremiah would meet much opposition as he sought to proclaim God's words of warning and judgment to the people.

Jeremiah was commanded by God to **chastise the people for their laziness, their lack of proper worship of God and their immoral lifestyles.**

Is it any wonder that the priests, the kings, and the people all treated Jeremiah very harshly?

If he'd known what lay ahead, he probably would have tried harder to refuse God's call.

Our first lesson makes it clear that **God had been planning to call Jeremiah for a long time:**

"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."

Jeremiah had his excuses ready. *"I'm lousy at public speaking, and besides, I'm only a teenager."*

But **God refuses to take "no" for an answer.**

Clearly, there's no question here of Jeremiah having a chance to weigh all the options, and make a calm decision based on his free will.

God has chosen Jeremiah since before his birth. And long ago God decided that Jeremiah will be a prophet.

Just as the prophet Jonah learned, when he tried to run away from God's call by boarding a ship headed in the other direction, Jeremiah discovers that **if God has chosen a person to serve him, then that person will serve God.**

The **only question** is whether the service will be done willingly and joyfully, or grudgingly and hatefully.

God easily brushes aside Jeremiah's two main arguments. Jeremiah's **inexperience and youth are irrelevant**, God says, because it is God, the creator and master of the universe, who will send him. And Jeremiah's **inability to speak well is irrelevant** because God will tell him what to say. Indeed, God **literally puts the words in Jeremiah's mouth.**

My friends, **aren't you glad that the age of Old Testament prophets is past?** Aren't you **glad that God doesn't call us** to such a difficult, lonely task?

But **not so fast**. Even though the details are different, we, too, are called by God to **go to the people to whom he sends us**, and to **speak what he commands us**. Jesus himself tells us: *"You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth."*

God had plans for Jeremiah. Does God have **a plan for you?** Or is that something that only happened way back when?

Some months ago, the members of one of our Bible Studies decided that **God does have a plan for each of us**, but that there are **lots of variations** on the basic plan, which can change depending on choices that we make in life. Still, **the basic plan doesn't change**.

You and I were created – we were formed in the womb – to worship God and serve our neighbors and all creation, sharing with them the love of God through our words and our actions.

We were created – and **in baptism we were re-created** – for the purpose of **sharing the good news with the whole world**.

GOD'S CALL COMES TO EACH OF US TODAY. We are to **speak his word** and **spread the news of salvation** in Jesus Christ. But I think **most of us are more stubborn than Jeremiah**. God just might find that we are **tougher to crack than old Jeremiah was!**

How do you try to escape God's call? **What's your excuse?** Is it:

- *"I'm too young. No one would listen to me anyway."* Or,
 - *"I'm too old now. How could I possibly share God's love with others?"* Or perhaps your excuse is,
 - *"I'm too busy. I have all I can do to just to meet the demands of my job and family. God should be thankful I even find the time and energy to come to church!"* Or, here's a good one:
 - *"I'm too shy to share my faith and I don't want people to think I'm one of those pushy, fanatic types."*
- Or **perhaps your excuse is a more humble one**, sort of like Jeremiah:
- *"I'm just not very good at that sort of thing. I'm not good at words. And I'm embarrassed about doing nice things for people I don't know well."*

Friends, God's heard every excuse ever invented by men or women, boys or girls who wanted to avoid his call.

And **God knows better than you do what a frail and hopeless channel for his word and his love you are**. After all, **God is the one who formed you in your mother's womb**.

God has known you since before you were born. And the amazing thing is, knowing everything about you, **GOD STILL WANTS YOU TO SERVE HIM**.

God still has an important task for you to do.

God still insists that **you are the one who must bring his words of salvation, forgiveness, and healing** to a hurting world.

The comforting lesson of Jeremiah, repeated often in the Bible, is that **when God gives someone a mission, God always gives that person whatever is necessary to complete the task.**

But, even better than that, God **promises to go with us** and **work through us**, so that we can accomplish what we are called to do.

God knows your limitations, and they don't faze Him in the least. He sends you out into the world anyway, to share his light and love.

Really, it's pretty simple. The old Gospel hymn has it right: *"If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and how he died for all."*

And if you're sure you can't share the Gospel verbally, remember the words attributed to St. Francis: *"Preach the Gospel always. And use words when necessary."*

Or, in the words of our Children's Choir anthem, this morning, *"feel God's love shining in us, around us, and though us."*

There are **so many ways** you can fulfill this call, my friends. There are **so many ways** you can share the love of Jesus – the gospel of salvation – with the world.

You YOUNG PEOPLE: when you see a classmate or a playmate being mistreated or excluded, you can give them a nod or a pat on the shoulder to let them know someone cares.

You seniors who are no longer able to live a very active life may **wonder how you can do anything useful for God.** But you can so easily bring some sunshine into the lives of those around you by sharing a pleasant thought or a positive word.

And as for **all the rest of us**, when we encounter all those people who seem **adrift on a sea of emptiness**, we can share with them the good news of Jesus and the meaning he gives to our lives. In a thousand different scenarios – some verbal, some not – we can **let the light of Christ shine through us into their world.**

Just as God put his words into the mouth of Jeremiah, **God puts his words into your mouths and into your hearts every Sunday when you come here to worship.** HOW CAN YOU KEEP SILENT with that wonderful word in your heart and on your lips?

God, who knew you since before you were born, has consecrated you to be his voice and his hands in the world.

And just as he told Jeremiah, he promises to **be with us**, to **deliver us**, and to **put his words in our mouths**.

One of the themes of the Epiphany season is that our Lord **reveals himself and his power to save through everyday things**.

That means our Lord reveals his power and his love **through ordinary people, too**. People like you and like me.

People whom the world may see as insignificant, because we are:

- too **young**, or
 - too **old**, or
 - too **shy**, or because
 - **we don't have it all together spiritually**.

Let the world think what it will.

God knows us.

And, for reasons we can't understand, **THIS SAME GOD CHOOSES TO WORK THROUGH PEOPLE LIKE YOU AND ME TO BRING THE GOSPEL TO THE WORLD.**

May we **sense his presence in our lives**, and his **power in the words and actions we use every day**, as we seek to *"tell the old, old story. Of Jesus and His love."* AMEN