



## **“Set Apart”**

**Scripture – Jeremiah 1:4-10**

**Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, August 21, 2016**

“What’s *your* call story?” It’s a question I got very good at answering during my first year of seminary. Most of us in my program did. It kind of comes with the territory when you’re studying to be a pastor. I remember telling my call story to peers during orientation, and to upper-class students over lunch in the dining hall, and to my church session when I went home over fall break. By the end of that first semester, I had the 30 second or the five minute version of my call story at the ready, should anyone ask: “Now what brought you to seminary?”

The church is very good at listening to the call stories of seminary students and pastors and missionaries ... people who have articulated a call to serve God through professional ministry. And this is all well and good; such stories remind us that God is at work in subtle and surprising ways in the lives of people of faith. But when we *only* listen to the call stories of certain disciples, it’s very easy to assume that a “call” is reserved for prophets and apostles, and men and women of the cloth.

In reality, we *all* have a call story. It may not feature a burning bush, or a flash of light from heaven, or – like Jeremiah’s – the Lord reaching out to place the divine word upon our lips. It is made up of ordinary, and – perhaps – extraordinary moments that punctuate the journey of faith. We all have a story of God at work in our lives, claiming us as beloved children and setting us apart for holy work.

But we have more than a personal call story; as followers of Christ we share a common story ... a story that begins publicly with baptism. The church celebrates and enacts this story every time the community gathers at the font to baptize someone into the faith. It’s the story of God claiming us as beloved children and calling us to the work of Jesus Christ.

A colleague of mine tells of a conversation that took place during an all-church retreat for the Presbyterian congregation he served. As church members of all ages gathered together for a workshop, the senior pastor posed the question: Why do we baptize babies? A few participants raised their hands: “We baptize babies because God loves them, even before they can love God in return” said the first person. “To welcome them into our church family,” said another. A third person replied: “Because God’s grace is for them, and for all of us at any age.” The pastor affirmed each of these responses – all of them right on target, all of them describing an aspect of the sacrament of baptism. And then a little boy raised his hand. The pastor – probably curious about where this conversation was headed – called on the child who earnestly said: “We baptize babies so they can start their ministries!” (Out of the mouths of babes.)

‘We baptize babies so they can start their ministries.’ Even at a very young age, this child understood the call God places upon us in baptism. In this sacrament, we are marked as Christ’s own and set apart to continue his ministry of love, peace, and justice. This is our shared vocation, a gift of grace.

What that little boy may or may not have known when he raised his hand to respond to the pastor’s question is that ministry is difficult. The Bible is full of stories of God calling people of faith to what often seem to be impossible tasks. There were Abraham and Sarah, whom God chose to bear the divine blessing to the world – a calling that required leaving homeland and family and inheritance, and traveling into the unknown. And there was Moses, whom God sent to the halls of power to proclaim freedom for the captives, and to lead Israel out of bondage. The disciples left their nets to follow a wandering Rabbi, who preached a radical gospel of justice and reconciliation – a message that would condemn him to a Roman cross. And Paul – the persecutor turned persecuted – was beaten and imprisoned and shamed, all for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, the challenging ministry to which God calls us requires courage and sacrifice and hope and trust.

No one knew this better than the prophet whose call story we have just heard – the prophet whom the Lord sent “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” God does not sugarcoat this mission; from the very beginning, it is clear the prophet has his work cut out for him. As one scholar describes it, his work is nothing short of pronouncing “the death of one world and the birth of another.”<sup>1</sup> The words God placed on Jeremiah’s lips are words of judgment reserved for a rebellious people. They are the kind of words that make people of faith uncomfortable – the kind we Presbyterians often like to skip over when reading through Scripture. But, in a time when Israel had forsaken the covenant and wandered from the ways of justice and righteousness, they were words that God desperately needed these covenant people to hear. They were chasing after other gods; they were cheating each other and ignoring the plight of the orphan. So God called upon Jeremiah.

It is no wonder Jeremiah protests, saying: “Truly, I do not know how to speak!” As a pastor’s kid, Jeremiah must have known Scripture well enough to know that a call from God meant trouble. And, as his ministry progresses, he learns firsthand just how challenging it is to bear the divine word to a broken world. His commission to “pluck up and pull down” made Jeremiah a rather unpopular figure; he became a laughingstock, and found his life threatened more than once. It was a ministry full of challenge and suffering. But there was no way it could have been otherwise; how else can a world more fully reflecting God’s vision of wholeness be birthed?

Thankfully, most of us will not face the *particular* challenges to which God called Jeremiah. But, in baptism, God does set us apart for holy work – for the ministry of love and peace and justice. We know what some of that means for us as a community of faith: We have embraced a stance of welcome, and have taken steps to alleviate the suffering of refugees. We are partnering with local schools and providing backpacks and school supplies to students in need.

But, personally, this vocation will look a bit different for each of us. Some of us live out this calling as parents or teachers or doctors or advocates. All of us will encounter opportunities to put our faith into action – at the schoolboard meeting, at the grocery store, at the ballot box, at the kitchen table. Whatever our particular roles, participating in God’s vision of *shalom* requires turning toward others with compassion rather than indifference, and standing in solidarity with the suffering of this world. It means rooting out injustice in all its forms, plucking up all that diminishes and demeans, and planting seeds that allow all to flourish. This is work that requires courage and imagination and perseverance and hope. Because, at the end of the day, what we are set apart to do is nothing less than God’s work of re-creating the world to be a place where all creation knows wholeness and well-being, justice and peace. Given the challenge of loving this broken world, it is easy to get overwhelmed. It would be tempting to deny the calling placed upon us in baptism, and to say to God, “Who, me? I’m not up to this. You need to find someone more eloquent or more courageous or more hardworking.” But, no matter how difficult our vocation may seem, we – like Jeremiah – can take comfort knowing we are not alone in this calling. That, my friends, is the good news in this – and every – call story. That “the one who calls will also sustain.”<sup>2</sup>

This assurance grounds the call of Jeremiah. Even before the young prophet hears his commission “to pluck up and to pull down,” he hears the assurance: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” These are the first words the Lord speaks to Jeremiah. Before God reaches out to place the divine word on his lips, this prophet hears the good news for himself: You are a beloved child of God. You have *always* been a beloved child of God.

For Jeremiah, (and for all of us), this is the only identity that truly matters. It does not matter how young or old Jeremiah is; it does not matter what he does or does not know; he is fully known and fully loved by God. And, as God’s beloved, he will never face the challenges of ministry alone: “Do not be afraid,” God says. “For I am with you to deliver you.” This is why the prophet can embrace his call *to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant*. Because the Lord who set him apart for holy work is the same God who formed him in his mother’s womb, and who sustains him for ministry.

And, beloved, this is true for you too, because the God who calls also claims. This is the promise to which Abraham and Sarah clung as they packed up their belongings and walked out in faith and that Moses recited to himself as he prepared to confront Pharaoh. It is what compelled the disciples to leave their nets, and what sustained Paul through prison sentence after prison sentence. It is the promise that we celebrate every time we gather around the font and present our children or ourselves for baptism. It is the assurance that God offers us over and again: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” “I will be with you to deliver you.”

Jeremiah’s call story is our call story. Maybe not word for word ... maybe not full of the drama of God reaching out to place divine word on human lips. But, it is a story of claim and call. A call to holy work. But also a claim: the one who formed us, loves us and will be with us in the midst of all challenge. It is an assurance that sustains us when our calling is overwhelming, when the task seems too great.

A few weeks before I went off to college, my mom gave me a gift. This was during a season of transition in my life. I certainly wasn’t giving up my home and family, like Abraham; or leaving my fishing net on the shores of Galilee; but, standing on the cusp of adulthood, I was entering a new phase of discernment about how I would live out my vocation to participate in Christ’s work of love, peace, and justice. So, one day, my mom handed me a jewelry box containing a charm bracelet with a single charm – a shell, the symbol of baptism; a tangible reminder of God’s claim on my life. And as I opened this gift, she said to me: “Remember who you are, and whose you are.” Remember who you are and whose you are.

Sisters and brothers - Our calling is rooted in our identity as children of God. At the font, the waters of baptism mark us as God’s own before the world and set us apart for holy work. Here grace washes over us – embracing us, surrounding us, and empowering us for the life to which we’re called.

So, remember who you are, and whose you are: Those whom God has claimed and called. And may these words of assurance sustain you on your journey: “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you ... Go ... Do not be afraid, for I am with you ...*”

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 42.
2. Sally A. Brown, *Feasting on the Word – Homiletical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 365.

## Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, Creator of the vast universe, yet mindful of each molecule, you peer into our depths and know all there is to know about us. You know what fires our passion and what snuffs out our flame; you know what keeps us stirring at night and what stokes our courage; you know what drags us down and what hikes our hope. You know not only who we are, but more importantly the person you wish us to become. Help us to grasp the greatness you expect of us and arouse within us the determination to live into your dream.

Gracious God, as you called prophets of old to speak your word and to do your will, help each of us to gain a sense of where you are urging us to go and what you are challenging us to do. Each of us is your unique creation, and you call each of us to specific actions given our particular situation. Pry open our eyes, uncork our ears and soften our hearts to the people around us – the ones we love and whose joys and tears mix with our own. Make us mindful of the ways we can help one another flourish. Help us also to be alert to the ones whose paths cross ours only for a brief time – the ones beyond our inner circle or who come into our lives only for a season. Help us to be awake to each person we brush up against, knowing that so often you beckon us through human need – both our needs and the needs of others. Each of us needs love and kindness, respect and appreciation, understanding and forgiveness, happiness and hope. Help us to cultivate these traits in ourselves as we give ourselves to others.

Loving God, there is much in our lives for which we give thanks, yet our hearts are also heavy for many reasons – racial strife, hate crimes, and acts of terrorism. This day we pray for the people of Louisiana and the multitudes who have been affected by the terrible flooding. The raging waters have had a devastating impact on homes, schools, businesses and public buildings. Some have lost everything and need help rebuilding their lives.

God, we are thankful for and awed by the brave, lifesaving actions of the first responders and many common citizens who put themselves in harm's way to save those who were in danger. We are inspired by their willingness to endanger themselves in order to rescue others, and pray that we might display the same backbone when faced with a disaster. We are also grateful for churches and charities that appeared quickly with food, clothing, shelter and other necessities to relieve the suffering of the flood's victims. We pray there will also be professionals to help them with their emotional struggles.

Mighty God, we also express our gratitude for the Olympic Games taking place in Brazil and taking our minds off the turbulent political rhetoric filling the airwaves. The many competitions featuring athletes from around the planet remind us of the value of hard work, the importance of discipline, the necessity of personal sacrifice, the power of courage, the buoyancy of the human spirit, and the beauty of teamwork. The Olympics also remind us that despite the fact that we hail from different countries and speak different languages, that we possess spiritual yearnings from different religions and no religion, that we pledge our allegiance to different ideologies and are governed by different forms of government, there are many things we hold in common with people from around the world and it is vital for us to learn to live together in peace. May we have the grace to recognize that each of us is your beloved child, and may we build bridges rather than barriers as we strive to live the just and compassionate lives you call us to live. Now, hear us as we join our voices together in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "**Our Father...**"