



"A True Miracle"

Scripture – Jeremiah 1:4-10

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, January 30, 2022

Welcome to the Family Madrigal ...

Where all the people are fantastical and magical ...

So sings Mirabel, the protagonist of Disney's newest animated feature *Encanto*.¹ *Encanto* tells the story of a family whose members are blessed with magical gifts:

Mirabel's mom has the ability to heal what is broken; she needs only whip up a magical meal. Her recipes are remedies for cuts and sprains and bee stings.

Mirabel's aunt can affect the weather with her mood. When she's unhappy, rain clouds gather overhead; when she's *really* unhappy — well, you better watch for lightening.

One cousin can communicate with animals. Another can, literally, hear a pin drop. Mirabel's uncle can see visions of the future.

Yes, the people are fantastical and magical. And, to top it off, they live in a house that is just as magical as they are. How did this come to be? Well, in their darkest moment, the Family Madrigal was given a miracle. After an attack on their village, Mirabel's grandparents were fleeing for safety. Her grandfather was lost; her grandmother left alone on the banks of a river cradling her three babies. But, in that moment, the candle she was carrying became a magical flame that would never go out. First, it blessed the family with a refuge in which to live. And, then, the miracle grew. The house came alive to shelter them. And, when the children of the Family Madrigal came of age, the miracle blessed each one with a magical gift. And, together, these boundless gifts have made their home a paradise for the Family Madrigal and for the community that surrounds them.

"The greatest honor of the family is to use their gifts to serve the community," Mirabel's grandmother explains on the night the villagers gather for the youngest cousin's gift ceremony. She speaks these

¹ Jared Bush, Byron Howard and Charise Castro Smith (Co-Directors). (2021). *Encanto* [Film]. Disney.

words into a room filled with anticipation, as family and friends wait to see what gift the miracle will bestow next. *The greatest honor of the family is to use their gifts to serve the community.* But, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that this honor has become a burden for some of the Madrigals.

Like Luisa, Mirabel's sister who was blessed with brute strength. Luisa spends her days re-routing the river and shouldering boulders and moving the church to a better location in the town square. But this woman of Herculean strength is, actually, feeling weighed down. Luisa is carrying too much, and she's crumbling under the pressure. And Isabela — Mirabel's other sister — is a beacon of grace; she blesses the community with beauty by leaving flowers in her wake. But this golden child has always felt imprisoned by others' expectations, and she worries what will happen if she strays from the path of perfection. The Family Madrigal is in a moment of crisis. Isabela and Luisa are starting to question the things that make them special, the gifts that set them apart. As the pressure builds, they wonder if they truly have the capacity to help the family, to serve the community, to live up to their callings. And no one wonders more than Mirabel — the young woman at the center of this story. She tries her best to help the family, but she struggles to find her purpose. You see, Mirabel didn't receive a gift. Unlike the rest of her family, blessed with gifts like super-human strength or super-sharp hearing, there is nothing that makes Mirabel special. There is nothing that clearly sets her apart. And, so, she must discover her gift, her calling for herself. While Mirabel must endeavor to find her purpose, the mission before Jeremiah is clear from the beginning. Today's Scripture Lesson recounts the Prophet's Call Story, which begins (as Call Stories tend to do) with the voice of God.

Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying: 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.

God's word is unequivocal: Jeremiah has been set apart as a prophet; he has been called to a life lived for the sake of God's mission in the world. While his call story may lack the fanfare of the Madrigal gift ceremonies, Jeremiah's purpose is no less clear than that of each magical member of that fantastical family. Jeremiah will serve his community by calling his community back to God. This, after all, is the role of an Old Testament prophet. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God raises up people like Jeremiah and Isaiah and Amos to be keepers of the covenant, to remind the community what it means to live in relationship with God and one another. And, as we know, the role of a prophet is never easy. Perhaps this is why Jeremiah perceives his calling *not* as a gift, but as a burden. As soon as God has stopped speaking, Jeremiah counters. *Ah, Lord God, he says, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!* Whether Jeremiah actually doubts his abilities or is simply making excuses, we do not know. I'm not sure the reason matters. What matters is that Jeremiah does not feel up to the task. The job is too big; his sense of self, too little. So Jeremiah counters God's words of promise with his own words of protest.

We can hardly blame Jeremiah. As I said before, the life of a prophet is not easy. God's messengers were often ridiculed and rejected. Jeremiah had it worse than most. As we learn at the end of today's passage, God sends Jeremiah to bring a word of judgment. Before he can build and plant, he must pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow. This work will bring all kinds of trouble. Throughout his ministry, Jeremiah will be mocked and derided, put into stocks and thrown into a cistern. Upon hearing Jeremiah's story, most of us would run the other way if God appointed us as prophets to the nations.

But, I expect our sympathies for Jeremiah run deeper. I suspect many of us can relate to his ambivalence and apprehension. For how many of us know what it is to feel inadequate? Whether speaking of personal ambitions or career goals or family obligations or something as daunting as God's call on our lives, how many of us have felt ill-equipped or ill-prepared or ill-suited for the task? Like Jeremiah, I expect many of us have been unable to "see beyond the horizon of [our] own self-limitations."² When it comes to Jeremiah, God responds to his protests with a promise: *Do not be afraid ... for I am with you to deliver you*. Then the One who formed Jeremiah in the womb places the divine word in the prophet's mouth. The Lord equips Jeremiah and promises to accompany him throughout his ministry. God has called this prophet to challenging work. The responsibility is great; the role is not easy. And, alone, Jeremiah probably would *not* have been up to the task. But Jeremiah is not alone. The Holy One has given him everything needed to accomplish holy work. The Creative one, who knew Jeremiah before he came into this life, will walk with him throughout his days. This is God's promise to Jeremiah. And this is God's promise to us — to every person whom the Almighty has claimed and called.

In case you're wondering, that includes you. Each of you. All of you. Whether or not you have a "Call Story" to tell, you have been claimed by grace and called to a life lived for the sake of God's mission in the world.

This is what it means to be the church. We are a body of beloved children who have been baptized into Christ's ministry of love, justice and peace ... In other words — commissioned to holy work. And just like Jeremiah before us, the Lord has equipped us and promises to accompany us throughout our ministries. This is good news for us, as it was to the one set apart as a prophet to the nations. But it does not tell the whole story. To this grace-filled promise, I would add another assurance: You are called in community. *You are called in community*. You are not alone in this calling, but belong to a community that is set apart to further God's mission in the world. As such, you have a particular purpose that matches your particular gifts. But the work does not fall to one or two. No one must carry the load alone, or bear the whole burden of others' expectations. Rather, we share a common calling; we share the work of ministry.

The Apostle Paul describes it this way: The church is the body of Christ. And, just as the human body is made up of eyes and ears and hands and feet, Christ's body is made up of members with different, Spirit-given gifts. We are not *all* called to be prophets (thank goodness). Nor are we *all* called to be preachers or teachers or apostles. Some are builders and others, organizers. Some provide hospitality and others provide support. Some of us are called to hold the hands of children and others to hold hands that are trembling with fear. Some are called to write poetry and others to write thank you notes. Some are called to heal with medicines and others to heal with hot soup and a listening ear. But we are all called to holy work; we are all given gifts to be used for the common good. And, together, we strive to further God's mission in the world.

Not so different, perhaps, than the Madrigals — the fantastical family with magical gifts. The family honored to use their gifts to serve the community. The church is not so different, at least when all is

² Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Commentary on Jeremiah 1:4-10 (August 25, 2019), workingpreacher.org.

well. But, remember, all is not well for the Family Madrigal. At the gift ceremony for the youngest cousin, it becomes clear something is wrong. A tile falls from the roof. Cracks snake along the floor and up the walls. Their magical house seems to be falling apart.

Mirabel — the only Madrigal who didn't receive a gift — is the only Madrigal able to see the cracks. But, when she tells the family, her concerns are dismissed. So Mirabel takes it upon herself to save the Madrigal miracle. But, then, she sees more cracks ... not in the magical house, but in her magical family. She sees that Luisa — the strong one — is carrying too much. She sees that Isabela — the graceful one — is stressed by the weight of her grandmother's hopes and plans. Even with their extraordinary gifts, they are struggling to live up to the family's expectations, the community's expectations. And they are crumbling under the pressure. Mirabel sees the cracks. But when she names what is broken, *everything* falls apart. The house shakes. The walls collapse. The roof caves in. And, then — after their home has been reduced to rubble — the magical flame flickers and dies. The family's miracle is gone.

But all is not lost. Mirabel — the only *unremarkable* Madrigal — does something remarkable: she draws her fantastical but fractured family together. She helps them see that they are more than their individual gifts, incredible as these gifts are. She helps them see that, while each member of the family is special, the true gift lies in what they can do together. She helps them see that they are stronger, better when they come together to serve the whole community. And, then, something even more remarkable happens. As the Madrigals survey the rubble of their home, the villagers arrive with hammers and ladders and wheelbarrows. And, together — sharing gifts both extraordinary and ordinary — the whole community rebuilds the Casita Madrigal. The magic returns. The miracle is restored.

Yes, the church is not so different from the Family Madrigal. For we, too, are a family made of individual members — each with different purposes, each with different gifts. No, we have *not* been blessed by magic. But we have been called. God has commissioned us for holy work and equipped us with gifts to be used for the common good. And while we have members who are extraordinary caregivers and extraordinary advocates and extraordinary artists and extraordinary mentors, our true giftedness lies in what we can do together.

Just take a look at our Annual Report. In that document, you can read about our Deacons, who have sent cards and made phone calls to sustain and strengthen the ties that bind, even in the midst of a global pandemic.

You can read about our Mission Committees — who have served neighbors near and far by collecting food for over 90 consecutive Sundays, supplying 1,150 backpacks to students in need, and helping 55 Syrian families return to their farms and livelihoods. You can read about the Westminster faithful welcoming Afghan refugees and reducing our environmental impact and finding creative ways to nurture our children in faith. You can read about individuals and committees offering extraordinary gifts, each one living out a particular calling to further God's mission in the world. But when you step back and look at the big picture — at everything the Spirit has accomplished through this body, through this community animated by the gifts of God's grace ... Well, that's a true miracle.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

God of the past, present, and future, we come before you with an open spirit, pondering what it means to faithfully follow you in our day. We acknowledge that, like your prophet, Jeremiah, we are not always quick to respond to your call. We have a pocket full of excuses and the challenges we face make us weak-kneed. Is it fear that holds us back from the life you urge us to live? Could it be the clatter of our culture that drowns out your whispers in our minds? Is our calendar so packed that we fail to even consider the path you commend to us? Or could it be that we are so mired in our daily routine that we refuse to consider a new script that might propel us onto a holy path?

Gracious God, deepen our desire to pursue the adventures you have in mind for us. If we are anxious that we are not up to your challenge, fill us with courage. If we believe we will prove inadequate, infuse us with confidence. If we lack the resolve, fill us with determination. If we fear that we will surrender to despair when faced with set-backs, inspire us with hope. If we are hesitant to attempt something new, remind us of the joy that comes from meeting new people and embracing new ventures.

Everlasting God, we pray that in following the Jewish prophets and Jesus, you will fill us with your passion for justice and your compassion for others, so that we may respond to the needs we encounter with a Christ-like spirit. Empower us to share the weight of someone who is suffering. Embolden us to resist prejudice and words that demean. Prod us to be generous in supporting the work of your church. Motivate us to preserve your creation for all generations to come.

Mighty God, we know that responding to your call includes praying for those who suffer, and so we pray for people who are facing immense hardship and misery. We pray for families that grieve the loss of loved ones or who have been harmed by the opioid crisis. We pray for teens who are bullied, and for people with mental illness. We pray for victims of crime, racism, or sexual abuse. Grant each one of them strength and support, perseverance and hope. May we have the will to alleviate suffering wherever we encounter it and may we have the gumption to act.

Loving God, we pray that we may be bold in answering your call to transform the world. Break down our resistance and build up our desire to go where you want us to go and to do what you want us to do during our brief life span. We are on this earth a short while, help us to make it count.

O God, the prayer Jesus taught us shows us the way. May we embrace each word as we pray together, saying, **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**