



Christ United Methodist Church

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Date: August 25, 2019

Sermon: Called by God

Text: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Speaker: Pastor Cheryl Arnold

Have you ever wondered why you're here? I don't just mean here at Christ on this Sunday morning. I mean why you're here on planet Earth—or perhaps why you're *still* here on planet Earth—and what your purpose in life is supposed to be.

If you have, know that you've got plenty of company. I mean, if people had all this figured out, then Pastor Rick Warren wouldn't have sold over 12 million copies of his devotional book titled *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*

Today's reading might make us a little jealous if we don't know our purpose because, presumably from a young age--perhaps 17 or 18—Jeremiah didn't have to wonder what his purpose was. Jeremiah had a direct word from God—he was to be a prophet to the nations.

Now that in itself is nothing to be jealous about. As we've been hearing Pastor Karen teach from Isaiah, the Hebrew prophets had a rough life.

See, the prophets were called to be spokespersons for God...and God only called these people when things were going very badly for Israel.

The typical situation was that the ruling leaders had broken God's covenant. They worshipped other gods; they turned their worship of Yahweh, the true God, into a showy pretense; and they cared more about their own comfort and privilege than they did about the people they were supposed to be serving.

So when a prophet was called by the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob to speak truth to power, he or she wasn't very popular with those who could make their lives very difficult. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus himself cries, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers." This was written into Israel's history—Jesus wasn't exaggerating.

Today's verses from Jeremiah chapter 1 make up the first part of Jeremiah's call story and he responded to this word from God—this call upon his life—much like other prophets in the Hebrew Bible.

A typical prophet's call story goes something like this: God speaks directly to someone and gives them what seems like an impossible task; the chosen one objects, tells God they're inadequate, and

offers excuses; and then God promises to be with them and gives them a sign—a sign that might be immediate in coming, or years away.

And at least with the prophets whose stories are preserved in our Bible—we see that God tolerates some complaining, but doesn't take "NO" for an answer.

For example, take Moses, whose call story begins in the third chapter of the OT book of Exodus. God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush and told him he was to free his people from Egypt, an empire that had enslaved the entire Israelite nation. Moses told God he wasn't the right person for the job—and then God and Moses argue back and forth for almost 2 chapters before God gets fed up and enlists Aaron, Moses' brother, to help him.

Lesson—if you ever see a bush that's burning but isn't consumed by the fire, don't go there. Just don't.

Now Jeremiah doesn't protest nearly as much as Moses did—perhaps because he would have grown up on the stories of Moses. But the task God gave Jeremiah must have seemed just as daunting. The Common English Bible says that, specifically, Jeremiah was appointed to "dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant." Only that last part sounds like any fun to me.

And all this was to apply to Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. Historians tell us that Jeremiah would live through the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and that he would have been exiled with thousands of others, becoming a stranger in a strange land, before any promise of hope was seen.

The 7th chapter makes Jeremiah's dilemma clear. God tells him to go stand beside the Temple—the most holy of sanctuaries to the Jews. He's to tell the people who are entering not to put their trust in this place.

Why? Because the people had defiled it by taking advantage of immigrants, orphans and widows, and by worshipping other gods, which included practicing child sacrifice. God also forbade Jeremiah to intercede for the people—something the prophets often did—they'd change God's mind.

Keep reading, and we see that Jeremiah obeys God's directives—but it practically, and almost literally, kills him. Jeremiah speaks for God, but he also complains to God, he questions God, and he accuses God. But for some reason, as much as Jeremiah wishes he could just let it go, he can't.

That's how it is when God calls you. If you don't feel up to the task, know that God will equip you. And if you manage to avoid the task, eventually, at some point, don't be surprised if God brings you back to it...or to something similar.

I find it unfortunate that when we talk in church about God's call, we may only think about those in professional ministry. Now granted, at least in our denomination, there are plenty of checks in place to help assure that only those who are called by God get appointed to pastor a church.

But I'm convinced that all of us are known by God, and called by God, by virtue of our baptism...and even before we're baptized. I wish we paid more attention to how God calls us in our everyday lives—whether through our vocations, our personal interactions, or our church.

In this congregation...

I know teachers who lose sleep thinking about the plight of their students—and who do what they can to assist those kids living with family issues, poverty, and academic challenges.

I know people working cash register who share their faith freely—and whose regular customers approach them when they need prayer.

I know coaches who mentor their players, teaching them not just about the sport, but about values and a way of life.

I know taxi drivers who get their passengers pastoral assistance when they need it.

And I know how many of you have felt called to serve Christ, right here.

When we talked about this scripture at Wednesday Holy Communion, many call stories were shared.

Someone told us how happy she feels when she hears our Ukulele Choir. She doesn't play—but likes listening to us. Incidentally, just this week, a woman I was visiting at home told me she loved hearing the Ukes' Special Music on our Radio Broadcast—she actually said we sounded good!

Many of you may remember that Pastor Don Archer felt called to start a Ukulele Choir after watching one online during General Conference 2016. Don didn't particularly enjoy ukulele music, but he was captivated by the intergenerational make-up of the group. He didn't even know if we'd have 10 people show up. But 55 attended that first rehearsal and our roster has nearly 100 members, ranging from 4th grade to people in their 80s.

Someone else talked about the joy she gets singing at nursing homes each month. I had no idea that she did this and briefly considered asking her to lead us in a hymn. I said, "You sing!?"—and she exclaimed, "Only with groups!" (There's that feeling of inadequacy we mentioned.)

Someone told us how visiting his wife's small country church impressed upon him that *each person* is loved and valued by God—something that inspires him as he preaches once a month at a similar type church.

Another shared how, feeling nudged by God—and against her better judgment—she reluctantly got involved with our Extended Table lay communion ministry. I knew she enjoyed this, but I was a surprised to learn that leading devotions and sharing the elements with residents at the Pines each month has become her favorite ministry—and she's in a lot of ministries.

Next Sunday, September 1st, is our Laity Sunday—a day when we celebrate the ways our congregation is active here at Christ—the ways we've all been called to serve. We'll have a slide show going before both worship services in the sanctuary and Mark Duckworth will be offering the message. Between services, during Sunday School, we'll have a time of sharing and reflecting on how our ministries affect us, and we'll have plenty of great food.

So invite a friend, or call someone you haven't seen at worship in a while, and join us next Sunday morning as we offer our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness to the God who

has called us from the beginning. It's a great way of remembering what our church has done over the past year and dreaming about what might happen next.

And it's a heck of a lot more fun than what Jeremiah had to do—I promise.