

Call to Worship

LORD, you have examined me. You know me. You know when I sit down and when I stand up. Even from far away, you comprehend my plans. **You study my traveling and resting. You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways.**

There isn't a word on my tongue, LORD, that you don't already know completely. **You surround me—front and back. You put your hand on me. That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't fathom it.**

This is the God that we have come to worship. **Send your Spirit, Lord, and guide us.**

Prayer of Invocation

O God, sometimes we tremble as we invite your presence among us. We will never know the fullness of all that you offer to us and the grand wonder of your dream for the world. Come to us with all that we can understand, O God. Show your life within our midst, Holy Spirit. This we pray in faith. Amen.

The Word

Jeremiah 1:4-10

The LORD's word came to me: "Before I created you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart; I made you a prophet to the nations." **"Ah, LORD God," I said, "I don't know how to speak because I'm only a child."**

The LORD responded, "Don't say, 'I'm only a child.' Where I send you, you must go; what I tell you, you must say. **Don't be afraid of them, because I'm with you to rescue you," declares the LORD.**

Then the LORD stretched out his hand, touched my mouth, and said to me, "I'm putting my words in your mouth. **This very day I appoint you over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant."**

Living the Word

Jeremiah was called to prophetic ministry about 600 years before Jesus was born. Jeremiah was called by God to give prophesy of Jerusalem's destruction that would occur by invaders from the north. This was because Israel had been unfaithful to the laws of the covenant and had forsaken God by worshiping the false gods called Baal.

The people of Israel had even gone as far as building high altars to Baal in order to burn their children in fire as offerings. This nation had deviated so far from God that they had broken the covenant, causing God to withdraw his blessings. Jeremiah was guided by God to proclaim that the nation of Israel would be faced with famine, plundered and taken captive by foreigners, the Babylonians, who would exile them to a foreign land.

In contrast to the prophet Isaiah, who eagerly accepted his prophetic call, yet similar to Moses who was less than eager, Jeremiah resisted the call by complaining that he was only a child and did not know how to

speak. However, the Lord insisted that Jeremiah go and speak as commanded, and he touched Jeremiah's mouth and put the word of the Lord into Jeremiah's mouth.

God told Jeremiah to "Get yourself ready!" The character traits and practices Jeremiah was to acquire in order to be ready included not being afraid, standing up to speak, speaking as told, and going where sent. God's personal message to Jeremiah was, "Attack you - they will, overcome you - they can't."

This was fulfilled many times in the Biblical narrative: Jeremiah was attacked by his own brothers, beaten and put into the stocks by a priest and false prophet, imprisoned by the king, threatened with death, thrown into a cistern by Judah's officials, and opposed by a false prophet. When Nebuchadnezzar seized Jerusalem in 586 BC, he ordered that Jeremiah be freed from prison and treated well.

Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all reported an encounter with God, a commission to do the Lord's will or speak the Lord's word, accompanied with an act or sign such as a burning bush or a touch from God on the mouth, to symbolize the designated role. In all of these cases, the one who is set apart for God's work, objects to the vocation, and then is reassured.

Resistance is not linked so much to individual personalities as it is to the very experience of standing in the presence of the Holy One and being called as God's servant. It goes with being set apart to feel unworthy or inadequate. Jeremiah states that "*The LORD's word came to me...*" This sounds like an epiphany moment. Then, the Lord God touches the prophet's mouth and puts words in his mouth, powerful words.

Several churches ago, one Thursday morning I was at a Ministerial meeting, and ecumenical meeting of the community clergy. The Lutheran Pastor led the devotions that morning by sharing something he had done the previous Sunday in worship. The scripture that he shared was the one about us as the Body of Christ, all being differing parts, all needed to accomplish God's mission for the world.

So he asked us clergy the same question he had asked the congregation: "What part of the body would you be?" Here are clergy responses: the ears because I am a good listener; the eyes as I watch over my people; the arms as I gather people together, the feet as I deliver help to others, the hands as I share myself with other. Then it was my turn: the mouth – and everyone chuckled. I'll share why I said mouth in a bit, but it was very interesting in that moment to hear each of us feeling set apart for different parts of pastoral ministry.

You also have been 'set apart' for ministry. What part would you be? (Pause) Think about that this week...Some of you were born into the church, some of you may have had an epiphany moment with the High God and found the church as a place to stay in touch with God. "The church is not a building - the church is the people. I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together." We do not exist for the church as a building or an institution...the church exists for us, the people, gathering in praise of what God can accomplish on earth.

Imagine Jeremiah being a candidate to be pastor of our church. If asked for his qualifications to serve as a pastor, he would say that he was set apart before his birth. He might say that as a youth he tried to make a career change, but that God said that his Creator, God would give him the words that he would need, thus explaining his lack of Seminary education.

The interview ends and Jeremiah, now a pastoral candidate, would disappear. Jeremiah might be muttering on his way out the door about 'digging up and pulling down,' adding the message to 'destroy and demolish'. The staff-parish committee would be thinking – that is the last thing we need to hear. They would never even hear Jeremiah talk about 'building and planting.'

Calls from God are scary. Tell someone God spoke to you, and they might look at you funny. Maybe your call isn't a voice. It could be a thought that you just can't shake – an idea that seems crazy or irrational. The more you try to ignore it, the more it just keeps coming back into your head.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks to something many of us know: we don't choose God; God somehow mysteriously and even against our will, chooses us. Jeremiah says the word of God 'came to him' - more like, it 'happened to him.' This was an event, God has been following Jeremiah's progress since the beginning, and now God has a logical response for every argument Jeremiah had.

There was no way Jeremiah could easily slip out of the plan and go his merry way. Maybe that is what God has in mind for each of us – some moment, some awareness when we say yes to God. Acceptance, or resignation usually comes only after a struggle, and that is true in Jeremiah's story.

He was so desperate to wiggle out of this call, that he tried the strategy first attempted by Moses, who said he couldn't speak. Making excuses really is not new. It goes all the way back to the story of Adam and Eve and continues today. "Oh, I couldn't do that. I'm just a lay person.. I never went to seminary." "I don't have very much to give. I'm not very good with kids." "I am retired..." "I'm too new to this church to help much."

We sound like Jeremiah all over again, even though he had much higher risk involved in his decisions. For sure, the reasons for not doing something that relates to God's work are often reasonable and justified. Most of us are not trained for these tasks, or if trained, we are ill prepared. Even so, if God's call is about skills and experience, God does not tell this to Jeremiah.

God doesn't offer a pre-class for prophets – "don't worry, you'll get it all there." God says "Do not be afraid," which is an angelic response that is found throughout the Bible. "Fear not" is an offer to save us and a promise to protect us.

At one point I was invited to share my testimonial with a youth group. For some, a testimonial is the story of one moment in time that changed how they live every moment with God after that. For me it is a long journey that I can look back on and see God working, to get me to this moment.

I mentioned before that I see myself as the 'mouth' in the body of Christ, here is why: At age 9, I started giving talks at 4-H meetings; in high school my best work and favorite classes were in Speech; my minor in college was Public Speaking. Those three times God was setting me up for a call to pastoral ministry. I had no idea, until I could look back at the journey thus far. John Wesley called this Prevenient Grace, Pre-grace: God working in our lives before we even know it is happening.

I became a pastor, but was yet to have my justifying moment in preaching. My first appointment, two churches, I was so anxious to give them everything I knew about God, which really wasn't much at that

point. Those smaller churches who take new pastors under their wings, deserve special stars in heaven for their patience and grace...

My second appointment was as an Associate position in a big church. My work was 80% youth ministry and maybe 20% preaching. Seminary and the lead pastor that I worked with taught me much, but I wasn't developing in my preaching very fast.

My third appointment was as a pastor of two churches, where I preached twice very week, but kept myself so busy with all of the other tasks and I let my sermon work became lazy. There were a few weeks that when Saturday came I still wasn't sure what I would say the next morning.

God's call was a wakeup call as I realized the responsibility I have to give God's word to whomever will hear it. It came to me as a statement that someone read at a seminar. They said, "write this on a card and tape it to your pulpit: the people have come because they want to see Jesus." Now I was experiencing God's 'justifying Grace,' as John Wesley described it. The epiphany moment when you finally get what God has been calling you to do.

My fourth appointment was once again an Associate position, but now I realized whenever and where ever I spoke, I was giving God, through the words of Christ, to the people that I am called to serve. My fifth appointment was as the sole pastor of a church of 325 people. One Wednesday night at Confirmation Class, I shared with the youth that each sermon is my homework for the week. It takes me a couple of hours of prep time and then 6-8 hours more to really listen for what the Holy Spirit has for me to share. I am now living into my call to preach – Mr. Wesley called that Sanctifying Grace.

One of the common patterns of scripture goes like this: God interrupts someone, issuing marching orders; the recipient resists (usually for their own good reasons); God insists, reassures and empowers. The call is wrapped in love, and the first response, in all human beings, to any kind of change, is fear. God notices young Jeremiah's fear, and God gives him the Bible's most frequent commandment: "Fear not."

Psalm 139, which was the call to worship, is the Lord's voice saying that God knows us inside and out. God might say: I know what you are thinking...or I know what words are in your mouth waiting to come out. I have better thoughts and words to give you. It can be hard to swallow what we think is best to say, but we can stay connected enough to God to utter the words we are given by the Holy Spirit.

The nation of Israel was set apart, just as we are as Christians. As United Methodists we are also set apart in what we believe and how we act in mercy and justice issues. Yet going even further, each one of us is set apart to be who we are called by God to be. We aren't set apart to be better than, but to be humble enough for the work we are designed for. Today we are appointed as ministers of the Treasury of the most High. Who are we to refuse?