

## Jeremiah 1: 1-9

## Before You Were Born

Sunday October 19, 2014

©Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our sermon theme is Vocation. In this series we have looked at a number of Bible stories about men and women in the Bible who heard God's voice calling them to new commitment. Last week for Children's Time I told the story of the call of Samuel, a little boy who heard God calling him in the night. Moses heard God in a burning bush. Abraham heard on a starry night. We mentioned Mary who heard the voice of an angel, Peter who heard Jesus calling him to become a fisher of men, and Paul who turned his life around after a vision that knocked him to the ground. All month we have studied a series of dramatic encounters between God and various people. Given the drama in these stories, it would be easy to imagine that these stories are the stuff of long ago legend, and yet the sheer volume of these encounters where ordinary people hear God's call – while they sleep in their beds, or tend their sheep, or walk on the road – is meant to illustrate that God is eager to call each one of us. God is seeking opportunities to turn ordinary moments into life-changing epiphanies.

Throughout this series we have also been studying the book *Healing the Purpose of Your Life*. The authors of this book propose that we have all been sent to the world on a sacred mission. They suggest that before we were born we each sat down with God to have a conversation about our lives. Before we were created, God had an idea of who we each would be, and talked about the type of person God was hoping we'd become. They say that God has a dream for each of our lives, and that we signed on to the idea before we were born.

When a child is born into your family you don't know who they are yet or who they will become, but you trust that they will reveal themselves to you overtime. One of the best parts of watching a baby grow into a toddler and then a child is to see this orchid unfold. Part of your wonder is about the precious purpose that is still being revealed. For some people there is a primal knowledge of God, that precedes their birth. You may have heard the story about a girl whose mother had a baby boy. The big sister asked if she could be alone with her baby brother. The mother allowed it but then worried why it was so important to have a private time with the baby. Hoping to protect the baby if necessary, the mother listened in at the door of the nursery. The older sibling drew close to the bassinette, leaned in and said, "Can you tell me what God looks like; I have started to forget."

I believe that the call of God is a call to re-connect with God, and to re-discover the purpose and potential of life that we agreed to before we were born. Our vocation is a life-long series of course corrections on this journey of life, as we strive to stay true to who God created us to be. Our vocation has less to do with what we do than who we are.

Today we read the story of the call of Jeremiah, a major prophet who lived in Israel 600 years before the Christian era. He was young boy when he first heard God's voice, calling him to awaken to his life's mission. Let's take a closer look at this passage and see what it has to tell us about our vocation and God's call in each of our lives today.

In the first place the story of Jeremiah says know **who** you are. When God called Jeremiah he was still a boy, and God said to him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you and appointed you to be a prophet." Jeremiah realized then that out of all the people on the earth, God knew him. So, it followed that Jeremiah knew himself, who he was meant to be. He had been consecrated for this mission, this role in life, even before he was born. In that moment Jeremiah had a sense of purpose.

It is interesting that God does not tell him where to go and what to say. Jeremiah is free. This call is not a set of marching orders. God's call is not a heavy yoke; this burden is light. It does not stifle our creativity. It is not a sentence; it is an invitation. We are invited to use our God-given gifts to serve our highest potential in the world. God does not call us to be puppets, but co-creators of our lives. That call keeps on coming, not just once, but over and over again throughout the chapters of our lives.

Po Brunson is the author of a bestseller entitled *What Shall I do with my Life?* He interviewed a thousand people to come up with 70 inspiring stories about men and women who found worked on finding their purpose in life. He says, "We are all writing the story of our lives. We are all seeking to know where we are headed next, and what impact we will make. All of us want to know that we have done something important- important to the people we love, and in the big scheme of things. We want to unearth our true calling. We want to be recognized for what we have done."<sup>1</sup>

The topic is personal because he wanted to be a writer but his professors did not see his gift. His work was rejected for years before he found an editor who would take a chance on him. Brunson says, "You have to fight the seduction of money and conformity to find your authentic voice." "You have to break away from the chorus to learn the sound of your own voice...it is not always easy. It is not supposed to be easy. Most people make mistakes, or have to learn the same lessons again and again...it is usually in the struggles of life that people change the course of their lives; in the easy most folks just talk about change."<sup>2</sup>

Rose Sanders was Alabama's first female African American judge. Her struggle to be seen and appreciated is captured in her song, "There is a river flowing in my soul. There is a river flowing in my soul. And it's telling me that I'm somebody. There is a river flowing in my soul."

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<sup>1</sup> Brunson, Po *What Should I Do with MY Life?* New York: Ballantine Books, 2005 p. xviii-xx.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. xxii.

When we find that river flowing in each of our souls the discovery gives us wonder, contentment and joy. God said to Jeremiah- Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you. You are a prophet. Know who you are.

In the second place, the Bible says know **where** you are. Jeremiah lived in a time of great turmoil. His life's mission was tied to his community and the particular faith crisis they found themselves in. Israel was not very powerful in those days. When they went to war they were outflanked. When they came to the table of commerce, they had been dealt the weakest hand in their financial game. The land of Israel was torn by indecision politically, and by the wars around between the Assyrians, the Egyptians and the Babylonians. Jeremiah lived when Israel was struggling to keep its head above water in a turbulent political sea where Assyria Babylon and Egypt were caught in a pitched battle for control of the region.

Jeremiah was an outspoken critic of some of the rulers of Judah, often an outsider and sometimes he even seemed to cherish his role as a critic of his own government. But through his life he listened to God and tried to follow God in his time and place. Though he questioned many leaders in Israel, he did not question his relationship with God, or his life's purpose.

A lot of people with great potential sabotage their life's work by delusions of grandeur. They think they need to make a big difference in the larger world, but fail to make the impact they might make right at home, in their own neck of the woods. There were lots of Assyrians whose names we will never know. There are lots of Egyptians we don't remember, but we are still talking about Jeremiah.

Amy Jill Levine has an interesting journey. She is an orthodox Jew from Massachusetts who earned her PhD. in New Testament. She teaches in Nashville Tennessee at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She has made a huge contribution to scholarship on Jesus because she brings a Jewish perspective to the study of Jesus, and that is an original approach. Levine marches to her

own drum and God seems to bless the choices. For eleven years Dr. Levine has volunteered to teach courses on the Bible at Riverbend Maximum Security Institute in Nashville. In her work with prisoners, she listened to their unique perspective on Jesus and found new avenues of research have opened up to her. God has been able to use her work in Tennessee with some of the least among us to encourage Levine to write a ground-breaking new book about Jesus, which has just been published, to good reviews.

To find your life's purpose at every stage of life you need to work where you are. When you are true to your purpose, often your potential for contributing begins in your neighborhood, in your church, in some local place where God's need people like you. Know **where** you are.

Finally the story of Jeremiah reminds us that you need to know **whose you are.** The Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts died this week – Right Rev. Thomas Shaw. He was a remarkable pastor, not only to Episcopalians but to the whole inter-faith community. He often preached sermons about how God could see what people are doing. That is a powerful message. God recognizes all our efforts to make the world a better place. God knows us, each and every one, Shaw would say. God sees how hard we work and struggle and strive each day. Often his simple message filled a dry place in the souls of his listeners because he reminded them whose they were. He reminded all of us in many sermons that God has set us on this path and God has not forsaken us, not for a moment.

The place where Jesus heard God's call to the life of ministry most clearly, was at his baptism. When Jesus came to the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John, the heavens opened and people could hear God's voice, declaring that Jesus was God's own; "This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." What made Jesus such a remarkable and sacred human being was that he never lost sight of the purpose of his life, and never forgot the conversation he had with God before he was born. Jesus never forgot what God looked like. Throughout his life he continued that conversation. Over and over he agreed to be true to his purpose. Before he had

done anything, or changed religion as we know it, God affirmed that this was the one God had sent.

Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. I talked to you and we created a vision for your life. Don't ever forget.... Whose you are.

Let us pray...Remind us of that first holy conversation we had with you so long ago before you formed us in the womb. As we pray this morning grant us a glimpse of your face. So we can remember who we are and whose we are. Amen