

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany ✠
January 28, 2007

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

"The word of the Lord came to me, saying, ⁵ 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'" ⁶ "Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." ⁷

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. ⁹ Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.'" (Jeremiah 1:4-10)

God seems to have a habit of calling people into service when they're least expecting it. The apostle Paul was on the road to Damascus, ready to round up Christians there, hoping to destroy all of Jesus' followers when suddenly Jesus appeared to him and called him to be his apostle to the Gentiles. Moses was tending sheep on Mt. Horeb, when God appeared to him in a burning bush and chose him to lead his people out of Egypt. David was watching the family's flocks near Bethlehem when Samuel came to anoint him king. Jesus' disciples were mostly going about their work as fishermen when Jesus called them to be fishers of men.

In the Old Testament lessons appointed for today and next Sunday, we see two more examples of God calling prophets into service. Next week we'll consider Isaiah, today, Jeremiah. God called each of these people into service, but none of them were expecting it. Not one of them said to God, "It's about time. I've been waiting for you to call me." It's actually the opposite. Most of them express some sort of concern about their inability to do what God was calling them to do. But nevertheless, God appointed all of them to the service which he had in mind for them. No matter what their objection, God reminds them, "I have appointed you."

Certainly none of us is expecting God to come to us and call us as his next prophet. The Bible give us no reason to expect that. And yet, as we look at this portion of God's Word, you can see that indeed, **God has appointed you**, just like he appointed Jeremiah. He chose you, he qualified you, and he cares for you.

Jeremiah may not have been expecting to become one of God's prophets, but God knew all along. **"The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."** God had Jeremiah picked out as his prophet long before Jeremiah was even born. Long before this, God was arranging things for Jeremiah – not just his future occupation, but God was form Jeremiah. God was responsible for accomplishing Jeremiah's fetal development, right from conception. But it was actually even more than that. **"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you."** Before he was even conceived, God knew Jeremiah. In fact, from all eternity God chose Jeremiah. God knew him and cared for him, and set him apart as his servant and his child.

You see, that is what God has done for all his children. Not only is he responsible for creating us, he knew us before we were ever born. Before we could do anything to impress him or earn any kind of favor with him, God chose us and set us apart to be his very own. We read in the letter to the Ephesians, **"God chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and**

blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ."

But not only did God choose Jeremiah, he also had in mind some very important work for him to do. In eternity, God had also planned the work he wanted Jeremiah to do. He was to be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah was going to be a prophet, someone who speaks for God, not only in his own town or country, but his message was intended even for heathen, Gentile nations.

But news of this assignment didn't sit well with Jeremiah. **"Ah, Sovereign LORD, I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.'**" Jeremiah expressed a two-fold concern about his new vocation. First, he didn't think he had the public speaking ability to be a prophet and second, he was too young. This is not an uncommon concern; many of us would probably say the same thing – at least the speaking part. In fact, there are studies that say that the fear of public speaking ranks up there with the fear of death for many people. Jeremiah isn't even alone among biblical prophets. Moses said, **"O LORD, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue."**

Now, if I were to ask one of you to stand up and speak to the congregation about this or that, and you told me that you're not very good at talking in front of people and that you would feel uncomfortable, I wouldn't make you do it. I would understand. I know what it feels like to be nervous talking in front of people.

But God doesn't let Jeremiah off the hook. He doesn't buy his excuse. In fact, he rebukes him. **"Do not say, 'I am only a child.'**" It's as if God said to Jeremiah, "Don't even start with me. Don't say that." Why is it that God is so short with Jeremiah, not even listening to his concern? Isn't God being a little inconsiderate here? But listen to what God told Moses when he said he wasn't much of a talker, **"Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"**

God says, "Didn't I just tell you that I formed your body in your mother's womb? Didn't I give you your body and soul, eyes, ears, and all your members, your mind and all your abilities? I gave you the ability to speak. Don't tell me that you can't speak. Don't tell me that I didn't create you well enough to do the things I have planned for you."

"Now go," God said to Moses. To Jeremiah he said, **"You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you."** Despite his excuses and concerns, God still called Jeremiah to be his prophet to the nations.

Now, these words are particularly applicable to those people whom God has called today to proclaim his Word – people like pastors and teachers, missionaries and staff ministers, as well as congregational leaders and Sunday School teachers. These words are a reminder to them that God is the one who gives the qualifications and gifts necessary to work in his kingdom.

That's what the apostle Paul was writing about in the lesson for today, when he writes, **"in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues?"** The gifts to do those things come from God. First God gives the gifts; then he appoints to service.

But, as Paul points out, not all are apostles and prophets. You may not have been appointed as pastor or teacher. But you are a part of the body of Christ. You have received gifts from the one who knit you together in your mother's womb and who *knew* you before your mother knew she

was having a baby. He gave you gifts that were just for you. And God has appointed you to use the gifts he has given you.

But how often do we say, "I can't. I don't know how to (fill in the blank). Surely there must be someone better qualified, better gifted than I am. My gifts – my talents (skills and abilities), by time, and my treasures – simply aren't enough. God, the gifts you gave aren't good enough.

Don't say that. God has given to you the necessary gifts to do the task he has appointed to you. If you're not sure what that is, a good place to start is the lesson we read this morning (1 Cor 13). After listing various ways God appoints people in the church Paul reminds all of them that God has appointed them to show love. God appoints his children to show love to others in every area of life – at home, at work, or at school.

And the ability to show love is a gift that God has given to all Christians – not because we're so loving or lovable by nature. No, in fact, we're usually just the opposite, especially when it comes to God. But nevertheless, God gave us love as a gift. He wrapped it in strips of cloth, lying in a manger. We wrapped it in his Son, Jesus Christ, who came to us because God so loved the world. And even today, he wraps his love for you in his Word, and in bread and wine. And places that gift in your heart and says, now, I have appointed you to love as you have been loved.

Ministry was going to be tough for Jeremiah. God called him to speak a message of law and gospel. **"Today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."** Basically, that message (even the gospel) wasn't going to win him any friends. For the most part, his message was going to be rejected and ignored. He was going to be imprisoned, thrown in a pit, sent into exile.

Showing love is not always easy either. Sometimes showing true love isn't popular and it almost always carries a cost. And there will be times when we feel we don't have what it takes to show love that always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres.

But did you notice what God did for Jeremiah despite his hesitation and excuse? He said to Jeremiah, **"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you."** The same Lord God who gives us all gifts forgives us for our unwillingness to use our gifts. The Lord who knows us inside and out promises to stay with us wherever we go. The God who loves us stands by our side to strengthen us when we are weak and give us confidence when we doubt.

This text from Jeremiah served as the basis for the sermon when I was ordained and installed here about a year and a half ago. I listened to that sermon this week. When your pastor was assigned to St. Peter, he wasn't tending flocks or catching fish. He was anxiously waiting for a call from God through his church. But he didn't know what lay on the road ahead. Pastor Vall-eskey's sermon on Jeremiah reminded us of that. We don't know what is to come, but we know the one who knows us and has called us to faith. And that same Lord has promised to be with all of us as we seek to serve him with the gifts he has so graciously given to each member of his body.