

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Epiphany 4 – January 28th and 31st, 2010

Jeremiah 1:4-10

“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.’ ‘Ah, Sovereign LORD,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.’ 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. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,’” declares the LORD.

Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Employees, God says to obey your employers just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. So says your God, and so you do that. You're faithful to your assignments; you work hard for your boss; you're honest in your reports. But what does it get you? The contempt of those who do as little as possible to get by; the same paycheck as the lazy; maybe even less than the liars?

Parents, God says to bring [your children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord. So says your God, and so you do that. You clothe them; you feed them, you teach them; you love them; you discipline them. But what does it get you? Are the food and clothing met with complaints; the teaching met with apathy; and the loving discipline met with tantrums?

Children, God says to obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. So says your God, and so you do that. You go to bed when they say bedtime; you turn off the TV when they say homework; you come home when they set curfew; you make their word your command, even when what they say isn't what you want. But what does it get you? Do their rules make your friends laugh at you; do their inconsistencies frustrate you?

All of you, God says to love your neighbor as yourself. So says your God, and so you do that. When hurt, you turn the other cheek; when blessed, you share the wealth; when sinned against, you rebuke and forgive. But what does it get you? Is the cheek-turning mistaken for weakness; does the generosity go unnoticed; does addressing sin get you ridiculed? Whatever you are in life: father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, employer, employee, retiree — the list could go on — whatever responsibilities you have in life: raising your kids, obeying your parents, running a company, teaching a class, preaching a sermon—the list could go on—do you ever find yourself wondering, What is this getting me? How did I get here? What purpose am I serving here? I'd rather be anywhere else but here.

Try Jeremiah's shoes on for size. Forty years of preaching to a people that would not listen. God had already had the northern half of Israel carried off into destruction by the Assyrians and the southern half was following in its footsteps of wickedness and disregard for the word and will of the Lord, so God sent the prophet Jeremiah for forty years of preaching that God's patience was coming to an end and their destruction was around the corner. Their time to repent, to turn back to the Lord was now or never and still they would not listen. Forty years of preaching to a people that would not listen.

What is this getting me? How did I get here? What purpose am I serving here? I'd rather be anywhere else but here? Try Jeremiah's shoes on for size. I cannot imagine how difficult it would be to preach God's Word from the heart, only to have the congregation respond, We're going to kill you for telling us we're wicked! That happened to Jeremiah. Or what it would be like read a portion of scripture only to have one of you come forward and set my Bible on fire as I was reading. That happened to Jeremiah. Or to be lowered into a muddy pit and left there for dead because the people you were sent to save didn't want to hear God's Word anymore. That happened to Jeremiah, too.

I don't tell you these things about Jeremiah in order to belittle the crosses you bear for living as God would have you. Suffering doesn't have to be dramatic in order to hurt. But I tell you these things about Jeremiah in order to show you the strength of God's hand and the depth of God's love and protection for you no matter what. Through his calling of Jeremiah to a tough ministry God shows us, too:

Sermon Theme: You Are Where God Has Placed You.

- 1. With a command to be faithful**
- 2. With a promise to be faithful**

That I am here on today preaching a sermon as the pastor of St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Watertown, Wisconsin is not by my own doing or planning, but by God's. That I am the son of my parents and the brother of my siblings and the husband of my wife, in the same way, is not by my own doing or planning, but by God's. That is not to say that I am a like robot whose every decision and motion is under the control of someone else. I make decisions every day that have impact on my life, as do you. But ultimately, each one of us is where our sovereign, almighty God, the ruler of heaven and earth, has placed us. God had David write in Psalm 139: All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

God reminded Jeremiah of that truth: **"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."** That Jeremiah was a prophet in the 6th century BC and I am a pastor in the 21st century AD and you are what you are and where you are and who you are is God's doing. And whatever station you occupy, whatever your situation, all God requires is that you be faithful where you are. Are you a parent? Be faithful to God and to your children. Are you a spouse? Be faithful to God and to your mate. Are you a pastor? Be faithful to God and to his flock. Are you a friend? Be faithful to God and to your friend. No matter what your position, no matter what your abilities, no matter what your budget, be faithful to God, be faithful to your neighbor. As Jesus put it, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

Do you notice that there need not be any guesswork involved when it comes to what God wants you doing? You are where he wants you now and you'll be where he wants you twenty years from now. The lesson: Don't worry about the future; be faithful in the present. Do you notice that God focuses not on the results but on the faithfulness? He did not say to Jeremiah, Your ten-year plan is to have 50% of Israel converted and your twenty-year plan is to have the rest. But he said, **"You must go to everyone I send you to and you must say whatever I command you."** The lesson: With God, success isn't measured by results; success is measured in faithfulness.

Employees, is God looking for you to be the boss's favorite and for record sales? No, he's looking for faithfulness. Husbands and wives, is God looking for you to supply your spouse with the finest money can buy? No, he's looking for faithfulness. Parents, is God looking for you to bring up kids with the most As and the cutest smiles and the biggest trophies and the biggest adoration of you? No, he's looking for faithfulness. St. Luke's, is God looking for 20% membership increases every year and a budget in the black and only smiles, no frowns, on the way out of church. No, he's looking for faithfulness. Faithfulness to him, faithfulness to his Word, faithfulness to his work, faithfulness to each other. The results? Those are up to God, not us.

Do you see how entirely out of place Jeremiah's response was to God's call? **"Ah, Sovereign Lord," [he] said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."** That was not a confession of Christ-like humility, but rather a statement of sinful arrogance. To accuse God of withholding ability where he has given responsibility is to try to trade places with him and be the judge! And it is to ignore what God requires from us: not results that bring us glory, but faithfulness that gives him glory. One does not require a high IQ or good looks or a big budget to be faithful. All that one requires is a heart that is 100% with God.

What is this getting me? That's the wrong question. It's not about me. And if my heart is with God I won't try to make it be. How did I get here? God put me here. What purpose am I serving here? I'm here for no other reason than to be faithful to God. God forgive us for presuming to take his place. For discontent in

where he has placed us, for anger at what he gives us, for directing our faithfulness and love inward and not outward. God forgive us, and do not treat us as our sins deserve.

2. With a promise to be faithful

Let me tell you about another prophet. Not a reluctant prophet of the 6th century BC, but a faithful prophet of the 1st century AD. You heard him preach in the gospel at his home church. You heard him preaching, faithful to his God, calling sin a sin and you saw where it got him. It got him a furious congregation prepared to throw him off a cliff. Faithfulness, not results.

And you know where that same perfect faithfulness that flowed from a heart devoted to God got him later. All alone, on a cross, forsaken by the world, forsaken by his disciples, forsaken by his own Father. And the words that came out of his mouth were not, What is this getting me? But, It is finished. We have not been faithful to our God, but he has been faithful to us. And to forgive us for presuming to take his place, he took ours. And what did it get him? It got him hell. And what did it get us? It won us heaven. Our God who places us where he wants us and demands faithfulness is our God who also came to be where we are and was faithful in our place.

You are where God has placed you. With a command to be faithful and with a promise to be faithful. That faithfulness that he has promised you has resulted in your salvation. God never gives us a command without a promise attached. Jeremiah could go to everyone God sent him to and say whatever God commanded him because he had God's promise: **“For I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.** Fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, employers, employees, retirees: Go. Be faithful where God has placed you. Entrust yourself to your faithful God who forgives you. Entrust yourself to your faithful God who will go with you and will rescue you. Amen.