



WHY ARE WE HERE?

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 Jeremiah 1:1-5
 First Message
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As we enter a new century and a new millennium we begin a new study from the book of Jeremiah this morning. I am not sure why God has us in this book. Originally, my desire was to study one of the major prophets, a task I have never undertaken before. As it happens, a series in Jeremiah is a good balance with our other preaching pastors who have been leading us through the gospel of Mark and the book of Romans. At PBCC we are committed to studying the whole counsel of God.

The prophets in general, and Jeremiah in particular, are both puzzling and powerful. If we are unfamiliar with prophetic literature, perhaps it is because we tend to get confused and lose our way when we study them. The prophets are difficult to put in context, difficult to decipher. The events they wrote about are hard to identify in space and time. We read along for a while, getting a grasp on what is being said, but then we lose our way. That is when we are tempted to give up and turn to the New Testament. This often happens with the prophecy of Jeremiah. This book is a long collection of poetry and prose spliced together. There seems to be no pattern giving order to the book. It appears to be a collection of sermons and historical notes which are vague and undefined.

As we will see, however, the prophets are powerful, too. That power is seen and felt in the poetry that creates pictures through metaphor and image. Even though we can't fully understand every line there is much we can comprehend. The power of the prophet is seen not just in an intellectual understanding of what is written but in the experience of entering into the poetry. That is why we shouldn't get bogged down in detail. What we should do is allow our imaginations free rein. We don't try to analyze a painting by standing inches away from the canvas and tracing every brush stroke. We stand back and let the colors blend together, allowing the painting to do its work on us until we let go and lose ourselves in it.

It is the same with prophetic literature. The effect of one image carries much more weight than its mere statement of fact. We can say that God hates sin, but when we get a picture of just how ugly sin is to God, and how ugly we are when we are sinning, it hits us where we can feel it. That is when we experience the force of an image. As Abraham Heschel said, "The situation of a person immersed in the prophets' words is one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indif-

ference, and one needs a skull of stone to remain callous to such blows." (Quoted by Philip Yancey in his book, *The Bible Jesus Read.*)

What we will learn from the prophet is that God is not some distant cosmic force who sits behind a computer sending out e-mails. He is a very personal God who is involved with us emotionally. We can count on him because he loves us. The other side of that is that as his people we have the capacity to hurt him tremendously. So God speaks to us with power through the prophet.

With that we come to the opening verses of the book. Jeremiah 1:1-3:

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month. (Jer 1:1-3, NASB)

We probably know more about Jeremiah than any other Old Testament prophet. As is evident in his confessions, Jeremiah was a keenly sensitive and emotional man. Together with Isaiah and Ezekiel, he was part of a motley crew. Someone has said, "The three major prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel - may be considered, respectively, the manic, the depressive, and the psychotic articulation of the prophetic message."

Jeremiah was pressed into service by God at a very early age. Having enlisted in God's service as a teenager in the year 627 B.C., he ministered for forty arduous years. He grew up in Anathoth, a city about three miles northeast of Jerusalem, a place from which the walls of Jerusalem were visible. Anathoth was one of the Levitical cities, but there is no evidence that Jeremiah functioned as a priest. His name means "Yahweh loosens" (the womb) or "Yahweh exalts." Perhaps this was to say that through Jeremiah the word of the Lord would be lifted up.

In order to understand Jeremiah we must have some knowledge of the political world of his era. The two superpowers of the day were Egypt to the south and Assyria to the north. Palestine, by now long past its prime, was a bone of contention between these two great powers. In fact, Assyria had already absorbed Pal-

estine. The northern kingdom, Israel, had been infiltrated and dispersed about one hundred years earlier, but Judah had survived through the faith of Hezekiah and Isaiah. During the ministry of Jeremiah, Babylon to the east began its ascent and was on its way to becoming the next world power, replacing Assyria.

Judah had been through its darkest time spiritually under Manasseh. This evil king had reverted to the worship of Canaanite and Assyrian deities and the black arts of magic and human sacrifice. Second Kings 21:16 says that Manasseh “filled Jerusalem from one end to another with innocent blood.”

In 640 B.C., Josiah became king of Judah at the age of eight. In 628, he sought the Lord and began to purge his country of idolatry. Jeremiah began his ministry one year later. So we have the picture of these two young men leading a spiritual reformation, calling the nation back to God. In 622, Josiah found the Mosaic law in the temple. The Torah had not been seen or read for many years. The amazing dynamic is that Assyria was too distracted with her enemies, the Babylonians and the Medes, to control Josiah’s reform. Later, in 609, Josiah was defeated and killed when he tried to stop the Egyptians at Megiddo. He was succeeded by Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, his sons, and Zedekiah ruled until the fall of Jerusalem in 587.

Much of the prophecy of Jeremiah has to do with this political and spiritual climate. Judah was like a pawn in this major political upheaval, a mere buffer between Egypt and Assyria, and later between Egypt and Babylon. A major part of this book deals with Judah making unwise treaties with these nations to gain protection and deliverance. In the midst of this tumultuous time God announces judgment, but he is still reaching out to save his people. Israel was a lamp about ready to go out, but God sent his spokesman into the darkness.

This was how it all began for Jeremiah. Verses 4-5:

**Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.”**
(1:4-5)

These opening verses contain three phrases that are filled with meaning for Jeremiah, and for us, too. First, God says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” “Formed” means to create or craft. The word is used of a potter (an image that is picked up in chapter 18), one who crafts a design. It describes that which is a specific object of God’s design and care. God is saying that he carefully designed and crafted Jeremiah in the belly of his mother. This is the same word that is used by David in Psalm 139:

**For Thou didst form my inward parts;
Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb.
I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Thy works,**

**And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from Thee,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.
Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Thy book they were all written,
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.**
(Psa 139:13-16)

God crafted Jeremiah in the womb of his mother. But before that, God knew him. He had intimate knowledge of him. Jeremiah was in God’s thoughts before one cell of his body was formed. He was special, valuable, and precious, even before he existed.

I believe the same is true for each one of us. We can say that we are the special, unique, well thought-out creation of God. We were designed and crafted by him. Every part of our body, our personality, and our emotions was put in place by a master craftsman, an artist. There is nothing abnormal or insufficient about our minds or our bodies. We are who God made us to be.

And we can say that God knew us even before we existed. We were in his mind from the beginning. He knew everything about us. He made the first move. Before we knew ourselves, before our parents knew us, God knew us. The essence of our spiritual journey is connecting to this one who has created us and known us. It is not found in seeking to understand ourselves.

We hear much these days about adopted children’s efforts to find their physical parents. They want to connect with the ones who knew them in the beginning. Recently, a court in Oregon went so far as to rule that birth records be released to children who have been adopted. We all have a deep desire to connect with the one who knew us from the beginning. Here in Jeremiah we learn that that one is God.

The second word that God gives to Jeremiah is, “Before you came out of the womb I made you holy.” “Consecrated” means to make holy, sanctify, set apart. Before Jeremiah ever came out of the womb his existence was marked by God. He was chosen. He was elected. He was selected. He was picked to be on God’s side. He had to be obedient, but still he was chosen.

All Christians have been set apart, chosen to be on God’s side. Before we were even born God picked us and made a commitment to make us holy. Holiness is the very nature of God, and we have been set apart to share that nature. Paul wrote in Romans: “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son ... and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Rom 8:29-30). That is why believers are called saints, holy ones, set apart ones.

The fact that God chose us in Christ is a difficult concept for us to grasp. We say that we chose God, that we made a decision for Christ, and from our perspective

that is the way it seems. But before we chose, God chose. He initiated the whole process. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Galatians: “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again...?” (Gal 4:8-9). The emphasis seems to be on what God does, not what we do.

This truth is both humbling and mysterious. We are not robots. We are given the freedom to follow or not, to obey or not, to believe or not. And knowing that God chose us should not stop us from presenting the gospel and asking people to believe in Jesus and in the cross. Yet all of this takes place within a bigger context — that of God initiating, working, and consecrating. As a Christian I am humbled when I realize that I did nothing to earn God’s choice. I couldn’t have. I wasn’t even born when he chose me. Rather than thinking that my individualism has been limited or my dignity diminished, I find myself dropping to my knees and weeping in worship, overjoyed to be one of God’s chosen people.

And now the third thing that God said to Jeremiah: “I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” “Appoint” here is actually the word gave. Jeremiah was designed and set apart by God so that God could give his life away. That is the nature of God. He is generous: He is a giver. Jeremiah didn’t always enjoy his role as a prophet, but he didn’t have any say in the matter. That decision too was made long before he entered into the world.

I believe the same holds true for us. We are set apart and consecrated for whatever God is doing. And what is that? According to Eugene Peterson in his book, *Run With The Horses*: “He is saving; he is rescuing; he is blessing; he is providing; he is judging; he is healing; he is enlightening.”¹

This is a critical identity issue for believers. We live our lives with an attitude of either getting or giving, one or the other. In our consumer-oriented, sin-saturated environment we are told to spend our lives getting more and more. And that is what most people do. But that is working against God. If that is how we live, life will be unsatisfying and filled with tension. God calls us so that we can live differently, so that we can become his gift to others. This will not make life easier, but we will live more gracefully and peacefully. We will live in harmony with what God is doing. Eugene Peterson writes: “Giving is what we do best...God gives himself. He also gives away everything that is. He makes no exceptions for any of us. We are given away to our families, to our neighbors, to our friends, to our enemies – to the nations. Our life is for others. That is the way creation works. Some of us try desperately to hold on to ourselves, to live for ourselves. We look so bedraggled and pathetic doing it.”²

Jeremiah was known by God. He was formed, he was

made holy, he was given away for God. The apostle Paul claimed much the same things for himself in Galatians: “But when He who set me apart, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles”(Gal 1:15-16). Isn’t it amazing to learn that the things that God spoke to Jeremiah and the things that Paul claimed for himself are true for us as well? God has known us, he has formed us, he has sanctified us and given us to the nations.

We are not a chance product, a freak of nature, an accident. We didn’t evolve. We do not live a meaningless existence. We are the well thought-out creation of an infinite and personal God. Our lives have meaning and purpose. We are special, valuable, and important, designed in special ways for special things. And the most important things about us are not what we have done, but what God did before we were born, before we were even conceived. “He knew me, therefore I am no accident; he chose me, therefore I cannot be a zero; he gave me, therefore I must not be a consumer.”³

Last week, a certain baseball pitcher made some inappropriate and ill-advised comments about the city of New York. In an interview he said the following: “Imagine having to take the train to Shea Stadium looking like you’re in Beirut, next to some kid with purple hair, next to some queer with AIDS, right next to some dude who got out of jail for the fourth time, right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids. It’s depressing. The biggest thing I don’t like about New York are the foreigners. You can walk an entire block in Times Square and not hear anybody speaking English. Asians and Koreans and Vietnamese and Indians and Russians and Spanish people...everything up there. How...did they get in this country?”⁴

These comments were met with outrage -- and not merely because they are politically incorrect. All of us believe that we are the special creation of God, that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Saying that anyone is sub-human, less valuable or second-rate because of race, economic circumstances, educational background, even sexual orientation or criminal record, causes public outrage. It is a lie against God. Every human being is created in the image of God.

Have you ever wondered why you are here? I have. I wonder why I was born in the United States and not somewhere in Africa. Why was I born in this century? Why was I born with my particular looks and emotions? Why do I have a big nose? Do you ever think about things like that? Why do we live in California? Why are we 6 feet tall or 5 feet tall? Why do we weigh 150 pounds or 250 pounds? Why are we good at some things but not others? Why are we an engineer, a psychologist, a fireman? Am I the product of some random people-generator? Why me? Who thought me up?

To these questions, God says: “I did. I thought you up ages ago. I knew you then. I made you special. I de-

signed each and every part of you. I created you in space and in time. I have committed all my resources to making you holy, just as I am holy. While you are here I give you as a gift – a gift to your family, a gift to your neighborhood, a gift to your workplace. I want you to be my spokesman.”

God has created each one of us for a special purpose. There is nothing trivial about us or about our lives. Everything that we say and do has meaning because we have been chosen, designed, and known by God.

The following lines by an anonymous author express this well:

I’m special. In all the world there’s nobody else like me. Since the beginning of time, there has never been another person like me. Nobody has my smile. Nobody has my eyes, my nose, my hair, my hands, my voice.

I’m special.

No one can be found who has my handwriting. Nobody anywhere has my tastes – for food or music or art. No one else sees things as I do. In all of time there’s never been anyone else who laughs like me, anyone who cries like me. And what makes me laugh and cry will never provoke identical laughter and tears from anybody. No one else reacts to any situation just as I would react.

I’m special.

I’m the only one in all of creation who has my set of abilities. Oh, there will always be somebody who is

better at some of the things I’m good at, but no one in the universe can reach the quality of my combination of talents, ideas abilities and feelings. Like a room full of musical instruments, some may excel alone, but none can match the symphony of sound when all are played together. I’m a symphony.

Through all of eternity no one will ever look, talk, walk, think or do like me.

I’m special. I’m rare.

And, in all rarity there is great value.

Because of my great rare value, I need not attempt to imitate others. I will accept – yes, celebrate – my differences. I’m special. And I’m beginning to realize it’s no accident that I’m special. I’m beginning to see that God made me special for a very special purpose. He must have a job for me that no one else can do as well as I. Out of all the billions of applicants, only one is qualified, only one has the right combination of what it takes.

That one is me. Because ... I’m special.

Why are we here? We are here because God wants us here — because we are special.

1. Eugene Peterson, *Run With The Horses* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1983) 39.
2. Peterson, 43.
3. Peterson, 44.
4. *San Jose Mercury News*, Dec. 23, 1999.

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