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1 Jeremiah

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Over Easter, a group of us went out to a station past Charleville to cater for a camp. About 120 folk from the outback church spend the long weekend together enjoying fellowship and sharing testimonies and stories of how God had been at work in their lives. And it was just amazing to hear person after person stand and testify to the goodness of God – how he had led them, protected them, carried them, challenged them and grown them through the journey of their lives. There were stories of triumph, there were miracles and there were stories of devastation. But the common thread that ran through these sessions was that the God who had called each one was faithful. He had called them, and he a plan and purpose for each life. It didn't always make sense at the time. There didn't always seem to be a way forward. But the God who calls his children is faithful. The God who calls each one of us is faithful.

This morning, we look at the call of God to Jeremiah. Now if any of us think now is a miserable time to be alive, spare a thought for Jeremiah.

Born around 640 BC, he lived at a time were one super-power of the Ancient Near East, Assyria, was on the decline and two others, Egypt and Babylon, were vying for top spot. For little nations wedged between the two like Judah, this meant the constant threat of war, constant pressure to ally yourself with the right side, and the risk of destruction if you didn't – or even if you did. It was a time where war crimes and genocide were the norm. There was no International Court of Law, no UN. These nations were power-hungry and absolutely brutal. The political world that Jeremiah lived in was one of deep turmoil and constant danger.

And we might say that being God's people, Judah did not need to worry. God was and is sovereign; they need not fear Assyria or Egypt or Babylon, they need only rely on God.

The God who had rescued them from slavery long ago.

The God who had placed them in the promised land, where they now lived.

The God who had chosen them and bound himself to them in an enduring covenant, saying "I will take you as my own people and I will be your God."

We might say that in Jeremiah's troubled times, Judah need not fear the nations but simply trust in their covenant-making, covenant-keeping God.

And it's absolutely true. They did not need to fear the nations around them. They did not need to fear man. They needed to **fear their God**. And that was precisely where they had fallen down.

For a very long time now, Israel and Judah had been in a downward spiral, moving further and further away from the one true God. Though there was always a faithful remnant, a faithful few who did fear God and walk in his ways, the majority of the nation and the kings who led them had turned away. And we got a taste of that last week, didn't we.

King Manasseh gave us a snapshot of the spiritual health of God's people – practicing all kinds of evil through mediums and spiritualists; worshiping the moon and stars; worshipping false gods within the temple, the most holy place in all the land; sacrificing children to false gods; and shedding so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem end to end, to use the words of 2 Kings 21:16.

This man, Manasseh, was to be God's representative. His example was reflective of God's chosen people as a whole, who were meant to be holy, devoted to the God who loved them and had saved them, a light to the nations – pointing the whole earth to the glory and splendour of the one true God.

Instead, their streets are filled with the blood of innocent people. Their children are thrown into the fire to appease false gods, images carved of wood or stone. Desecrating God's temple. They were

thoroughly corrupt and had been for a very long time. They had broken the covenant with God completely and repeatedly and were brazen in their lack of fear toward God. Any reforms that occurred were short-lived.

God had been so unbelievably patient and merciful and gracious toward them, not dealing with them according to what their sins deserved, sending prophets to call them back, but finally the tipping point had come. They had known from before they entered the promised land the consequences of breaking the covenant, and now, finally, it was time for these curses to be brought to bear upon them.

In 2 Kings 21:12-15, God says,

“I will bring disaster upon Jerusalem and Judah ... I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish ... I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and will hand them over to their enemies ... because they have done evil in my eyes and have provoked me to anger from the day their forefathers came out of Egypt until this day.”

And the man who was given the task of taking this message to Judah was Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a priest who lived in a little town about 6km from Jerusalem. He was a young man, most likely in his late teens to early 20s, when God began to speak through him.

“The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. ² The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, ³ and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.”

⁴ 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.”

Jeremiah’s life, without a shadow of a doubt, was grounded in the sovereign purposes of God.

- We see in his call that he was **known** by God – known even before God made him. Let that sink in for a moment. Before he was conceived, before God formed him, Jeremiah was on God’s mind. The creator of all things knew Jeremiah – the man he would be, the things he would accomplish, what made him tick. He was completely known by God – and then he was made. And this kind of knowing has a special meaning – it’s a word that speaks of deep commitment and intimate relationship. It’s covenant language. Elsewhere, God speaks of knowing Israel, of choosing her out of all the nations to be his. The Old Testament speaks of husbands knowing their wives. This knowledge is a deep one, intimate and binding. It speaks of care and love and enduring commitment. Jeremiah was known by God, chosen, precious and bound to the creator of the universe well before he physically came into the world.

- Secondly, Jeremiah was set apart or consecrated by God. Again, this is special language that signifies setting something aside for a specific purpose and for the sole use of the Lord God. God had marked Jeremiah out, set him apart from before his birth for his holy purposes.

- Thirdly, he had been formed by God in the womb. He had been knit together according to the perfect and unique design of God, intimately known and fearfully and wonderfully made.

- And finally, he had been appointed – given a specific task – of being God’s prophet to the nations. To speak the words that God gave him, not just to his own countrymen, but to whomever God sent him.

Jeremiah’s life was unmistakably grounded in the sovereign purposes of God.

God’s call on his life had nothing to do with what Jeremiah had done or would go on to do. Rather, God had set his mind on Jeremiah before he came into being and created him for this specific

purpose. God was presiding over his life – Jeremiah was made for this task. But that didn't seem of much comfort to Jeremiah at the time.

⁶“Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

He was inexperienced, he was young and he was being commissioned to an incredibly difficult, dangerous task; to stand against hostile nations like Babylon, Egypt, Philisita and Moab – even his own people - and pronounce God's impending judgement on them! He reacts how any of us would. **Lord, I can't.**

It reminds us of Moses – “who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” [Ex 3:11]

It reminds us of Isaiah – “woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips!” [Is 6:5]

They both pleaded unworthiness to undertake the task God had called them to, yet as with Moses and Isaiah and so many others, the call of God to Jeremiah came with his reassurance.

“Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

Jeremiah's call came with the promise of God's presence and God's protection.

⁹ Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “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.”

God would be with him. God would protect him. And God would give him the words to say. Jeremiah's task was simply to deliver the message. But what a message it was!

It was one of destruction – to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow. There was judgement coming for Judah and the nations. Incredibly dark times lay ahead. But there was a glimmer of hope also – once judgement has taken place, there will be a time of renewal – of building and planting.

God goes on to give Jeremiah two visions so that he would know God's call was certain and that God's words would come to fulfillment.

¹¹ The word of the LORD came to me: “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

“I see the branch of an almond tree,” I replied.

¹² The LORD said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I am watching^[b] to see that my word is fulfilled.”

Now of course God had no reason to doubt that his word would come to pass – for when has God ever failed? Rather, this was an assurance to Jeremiah that God would bring to pass all that he commanded Jeremiah to say.

The second vision is far more sinister.

¹³ The word of the LORD came to me again: “What do you see?”

“I see a pot that is boiling,” I answered. “It is tilting toward us from the north.”

¹⁴ The LORD said to me, “From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. ¹⁵ I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms,” declares the LORD.

“Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem; they will come against all her surrounding walls and against all the towns of Judah.

¹⁶ I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made.

¹⁷ “Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. ¹⁸ Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. ¹⁹ They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

This vision gives Jeremiah another taste of what the Lord has in store for his people. A boiling pot, tilting toward Judah from the north, about to spill its scalding contents onto all who inhabit the land. Disaster and destruction would come from the kingdoms of the north. Their kings would conquer Judah, setting up their thrones in Jerusalem and ruling over the land. And this would be God’s righteous act of judgment on his covenant people.

The message of God’s impending judgement on sin would have been just as unpopular, just as offensive, just as provocative in Jeremiah’s day as in ours. We see the rage channelled at those who stand up for God’s word in the public sphere today. Jeremiah could expect no different.

And so God says get yourself ready. Prepare yourself for what lies ahead. Do not be terrified, for I have strengthened you to stand against the whole land – from the highest born to the lowest. Though they fight against you, they won’t overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you.

Now with hindsight, we now know how the story unfolds. We’ll be delving into it over the next few months. But to Jeremiah at the time – in the words of one commentator - *there was only the appalling prospect of a task before him for which he felt inadequate and ill-equipped. Only turmoil and apprehension filled the mind of such a youthful ambassador for God. Yet Jeremiah knew the need ... to continue keeping God’s word alive among a people who had grown careless and turned away. He accepted the task, strengthened by the strong conviction that the Lord his God would carry out his purposes and stand by him as he spoke God’s word to the people of his age.*

And how desperately Jeremiah would have had to hold onto the call of God and his assurance in the days that lay ahead. In those times where he was mocked and reviled, his life threatened, all the while knowing that destruction was coming – how he would have needed to remember, to cling to God’s call, to the truth that he was known, chosen, set apart and appointed to the task, the truth that God was with him and would rescue him.

But here at the beginning, Jeremiah accepted the call of God upon his life and he walked forward in faithful obedience.

And we might say *that's all very well for Jeremiah, but God hasn't called me. God didn't know me or choose me before I existed. He didn't set me apart for a specific purpose in this life.*

- How many of us ever felt lost in life, unsure why we are here or what we are meant to do?
- How many of us have ever felt like God has dropped us in a set of circumstances and then left us?
- How many of us have found ourselves so far from where we'd hoped to be, with a trail of broken dreams behind us?
- How many of us have felt woefully inadequate and ill-equipped for the tasks that God has placed before us?
- How many of us have known what it is we should be doing in response to God's goodness toward us, but simply don't want to do it? Finding any and every possible excuse.
- How many of us feel like we are simply biding time, like a ship without a sail, no real hope for the future, just waiting until our days come to an end?

In the apparent mess of life, it can be easy, it is so very tempting, to feel like there is no purpose for our lives. But that's not correct for any one of us who believe in Jesus.

God's holy word tells us that God has called each and every one of us out of darkness into his wonderful light [1 Peter 2:9]. God chose us in Christ 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 and daughters through Jesus Christ...in him we were chosen, having been predestined according to God's perfect plan and will [Eph 1:4-5, 11].

We know that God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. Those he predestined he called, those he called he also justified, those he justified he also glorified. [Romans 8:28-].

We were each known. Chosen. Called. Predestined. Set apart for God.

And we might say *but I have not been appointed a prophet to the nations.* And thank goodness for that! Which of us would want to be Jeremiah, to have Jeremiah's job?! Yet for each and every one of us, God has a plan and purpose and kingdom work to do. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do [Eph 2:10].

And we might say *but God has never tapped me on the shoulder and shown me exactly what it is I am to do.* Perhaps not. But he's given each one of us this – his word - to live by. To bring to bear

in whatever circumstance of life we find ourselves in today; whatever circumstances of life we might find ourselves in in the future.

God's given each one of us the enduring command to love him with all our hearts and minds and souls and to love our neighbour as ourselves. How can we be doing that today – and every day?

He's called each and everyone of us to know him, to walk in obedience to him, to say no to sin and live for righteousness. To let our light shine before man, that they may see our good works and praise our Father in heaven. How can we be doing that today – and every day?

He's called each and every one of us to go and make disciples, baptising them and teaching them to obey everything he has commanded us. How can we be doing that today – and every day?

And he's given us his Holy Spirit, his constant presence, who teaches us, guides us, gives us the words to say, comforts us and points us to Jesus, now and forevermore. We may feel young or inexperienced or ill-equipped, but God has promised to be with us always, to the very end of the age, and he **has** rescued us.

And so we, like Jeremiah, must choose – even today - if we too will accepted the call of God upon our life and walk forward in faithful obedience, come what may.

We're going to stand and sing a wonderful hymn – “take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to Thee”

May these words be our prayer to God this morning.

