

SERMON | FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Jeremiah 1:4-10 | Luke 4:21-30 | January 30, 2022 | The Rev. Lydia Gajdel | St. Paul & the Redeemer

Jesus begins to speak. Surely and confidently, he takes his rightful place as the completion of the prophecy. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." After 40 days in the desert being tempted by Satan, we find Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. It is in this statement that Jesus proclaims his identity: this is who I am. The one for whom the prophets have prepared. Grounded in God's truth and the work before him, Jesus steps forward into the complexity of his public ministry. I am here. This is who I am. A statement that feels like a rare phenomenon these days – total confidence in one's own identity and call.

Recently I stumbled across a survey of therapists around the United States that was done by the New York Times. Completed in the fall of 2021, the survey sought to gain a better understanding of the fate of our mental health two years into the pandemic and gather some insight into where we may be heading. While it was an interesting read, it felt like things we already sort of knew. As a country, we are anxious and depressed. Demand for mental health professionals is going up daily. In short, we're not thriving.

But the most compelling piece for me was how the struggles with our mental health are

seeping out into daily life. Behavioral interventions in schools are being forced to change as our children are being socialized differently. Marriages and relationships are buckling under the strain of having to face ongoing problems simply because couples are spending more time together. The population is shifting out of major cities as people seek to work remotely from, well, anywhere.

Our experiences shape who we are and in this moment we as a world are standing face to face with the reality that we are becoming different people. We have always been shaped and molded by the contours of our lives, but rarely has it been so blatantly seen. We are different human beings than we were. Faced with the question of who we are now and who we will become. Spurred by a pandemic, a divorce, a job loss, a stubbed toe – identity is always on the table for re-evaluation. Sometimes that is a beautiful thing. Sometimes it is terrifying. Most of the time, it is both.

In the midst of one of my several early 20's meltdowns, my spiritual director told me to look up the scripture we read today from Jeremiah. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." He

assured me that he didn't think of it in a cheesy motivational poster God loves you sort of way, but rather as a reminder that somebody knows you. Even if you don't feel like you totally know yourself right now, you are knowable. Today our scripture reminds us that identities shift and flow, but we are not lost. Change does not equate to being indecipherable. Because we have a God who knows us. Who made us. Who stands firm in the truth of our existence both in the moments where we are so sure of who we are and while we seemingly wander aimlessly searching for ourselves. Because the truth is somewhere in between those poles. And there too is our God.

Our scripture from Jeremiah is one more beautiful example of God calling a prophet and the prophet looking around for the guy standing behind him, saying "Are you sure it's me you're talking to?" God comes to Jeremiah in the quiet and invites him into newness of life. The world is faced with political turmoil from every angle and God says, "Don't worry, I'll help you. You were made for this." Jeremiah is uncertain of his call. Doesn't think he can do it. And yet, God stands firm in the truth of his existence.

As I find great comfort in the knowledge of being known by God and called to life with God, I am vigilant to stay away from the idea of God having one, unchanging plan. It is not that God ordered our every move from the time we are zygotes. Rather, we live in God's grace. Constantly being perfectly known and perfectly loved as we journey into the creatures that God

is calling us to be. God's knowing of us, of who we are at our very essence, means God knows our lives and is with us in them. God's love for us is a constant reassurance that we have what we need to be who we are and will be. And through it all, God is right there loving us into existence.

Today our lectionary invites us into contemplating what it means to be called by God with these two iconic scriptural call moments: the calling of Jeremiah and Jesus's first prophetic disclosure in Luke. Two dramatic moments of God standing in the midst of his beloved and calling them into service of God's Truth. Often times when we as a church talk about what it means to be called by God we think in the scope of the dramatic: a call to ministry, a call to dedicating one's life to service through our careers, a call to parenthood. Our scripture today reminds us that being called by God also means being truly known in the moments when we may feel lost, or at least less confident, in who we are and what we're doing. There are moments when we stand in front of a room and proclaim this is who I am without fear or trembling and there are moments when we stand searching for the north star. And God is in the midst of both, at work in and with us, calling us to newness of life. We don't always have to know what we're doing. God is there. Knowing us. Loving us. Calling us home.