

The Call - Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Psalm 139

Origin stories are important. They tell us who we are, who we are connected to and how these relationships shape us and our purpose. They might be birth stories or, as my great uncle related at my great aunt's funeral last week, the stories of how each of their adopted children were adopted. They might be stories about how a couple got together – *"How did the two of you meet?"* They might be stories about how you ended up in a particular career. They might be stories about why you came to this particular church...? *(Can I ask you to hold onto that because you'll have a chance to share in a few moments.)*

In our Old Testament reading this morning we hear some of the prophet Jeremiah's origin story. Jeremiah lived in the Kingdom of Judah in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE (100 years after the northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated and assimilated by Assyria) and belonged to a priestly family. Jeremiah 1:1 tells us he was the son of Hilkiah, who belonged to the priests of Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. And, in verses 4 to 10, we hear how, as a very young man, God called him to be a prophet.

It is interesting to think about how this call might have come about... Commentator J.A. Thompson writes, *"The way in which a call from God [comes] to a potential prophet is impossible to define, since God makes [God's] approach in very personal ways. Often a good deal of preliminary activity goes on before a [person] responds. The experiences of life, the influence of other people, the personal cultivation of one's communion with God all contribute."*

The same can be said about our origin stories - birth stories, relationships, work, church commitments; *"a good deal of preliminary activity goes on"*; our experiences, our relationships with others, our relationship with God, and all these come together in the approach God makes to each of us.

Because, firstly, God's makes God's approach in very personal ways.

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 appointed you a prophet to the nations."*

Three important verbs appear here to underscore the personal nature of God's call to Jeremiah. God tells Jeremiah he *'knows him'* – a word in the Old Testament that signifies not only intellectual knowing but deep commitment. It is used of the intimate relations of committed couples (Gen 1:4), of God's commitment to Israel (Amos 3:2) and of God's grief that Israel does not reciprocate this deep commitment (Hosea 4 and 6). The second verb indicates that Jeremiah has been set apart, *'consecrated'* for a special purpose and the third that Jeremiah has been *'appointed'* to a special task.

But what they all add up to is the simple fact that God called Jeremiah!

God called this ordinary human being - living in a time and a place. *"Jeremiah son of Hilkiah...in the land of Benjamin... in the days of King Josiah... in the thirteenth year*

of his reign". An ordinary human being living in an ordinary time in an ordinary place. God sought out relationship with this ordinary human being. Perhaps it is no wonder that this relationship changed everything for Jeremiah.

I have been thinking about Pastor Sam Hearn's message last Sunday, about how our mission in the world is not just an intellectual idea, but a deep desire for relationship with others - and how transformative such relationships are! *(Picture)* This was his diagram showing how being committed to 'just relationships' leads to "*creating trust and belonging*," "*growing well-being*" and empowering others to, "*become agents of transformation*". Remember how he illustrated this with the story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well. And it's the story that's told over and over again. According to the research - of those who escape cycles of disadvantage and injustice virtually all cite an individual who made a significant difference in their lives.

We all need at least one person who cares, who invests in relationship with us, and - this is the wonder of the gospel story - we are told we have a God who cares and who has invested everything God has in the relationship with us. A God whose commitment is deep. A God whose commitment is unending. As the Psalmist says, "*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*" A God who calls us - each of us - ordinary human beings - to be in relationship with God.

So, secondly, like Jeremiah, we need to understand what it means to be called by God - to be in relationship with God.

Jeremiah's protest is a very human protest isn't it, "*Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.*" We could all inset something there, couldn't we? "*I do not know how to speak, for I am only a...a woman, only from a minority group, only an old person, only APS level one or two!*"

But God rebukes Jeremiah! "*Do not say, I am only... Don't repeat that! For I have chosen you. I have chosen you to bear my message. And I am with you.*"

When we are called by God there is this strange and wonderful coming together of who we are - God calls us as the ordinary human beings we are and asks us not to denigrate who we are - and who God is. God reminds us, gently and not so gently (*there is nothing gentle about God touching Jeremiah's mouth in this passage*) that this message is not our message. This work is not our work to accomplish. We are part of the work. We are the messengers. We are the workers. We are not all of it. God is all of it, and this God who is all of it, is with us to deliver us. Thus says the Lord.

And thirdly, this is a call, a commissioning, an origin story we need to hold close to us because the work we are doing - even the small part we do - with God - will be hard. It will be the hardest thing we have ever done.

Our reading ends in this way. "*See today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*"

There are six verbs in these verses, and I don't know about you, but I breathe a sigh of relief when I get to the building and the planting. But the reality is that there are more verbs here about doing hard things than doing pleasant things. J.A. Thompson writes, *"Jeremiah would clearly have preferred not to speak about uprooting, pulling down, destroying and demolishing the nation, and at times he clearly wished to escape that task."* (Check out Jeremiah chapter 20.)

Jeremiah, himself, is not exempt from the awfulness; the awfulness of the message of what he must convey, and the awfulness of what overtakes his nation. There is no promise here of separating bad guys from good guys, allocating certain verbs to some and certain verbs to others. Jeremiah and his people experience these prophecies together. And it is only *after* the plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing, that the building – *rebuilding* – and the planting – *replanting* – takes place.

Today is our church AGM. Our moment to reflect on our call, our commissioning, our origin story – a very human mix of nationalism and denominationalism and responding to the call of God. How it was the proclamation on the 1st January 1901 of the Commonwealth of Australia that led the NSW Baptist Union to contact the other state unions about beginning *"a Baptist work in the new national capital"*. How the President of the Baptist Union of Australia, Rev J.H. Goble, declared at the church opening 23rd February 1929, *"This city, now in its infancy, will grow into manhood. Canberra, the seat of legislature and statesmanship, will also become the centre of learning and of arts and sciences in Australia. Australians should make every sacrifice to make it also a city of God."* How there have been sacrifices – the first minister, Dr Waldock, broke down in tears telling his church he had been called to Canberra. *"It was only after much prayer and some misgiving that I at last came to the conclusion that it was my duty to accede to the oft repeated wishes of the Baptists of Australia,"* he said.

There have been sacrifices and there has been hard work and there have been challenges and there have been great things done and there have been missteps. There has been uprooting and pulling down and destroying and demolishing and rebuilding and replanting - up until this very year as we know.

And it will go on. And we will go on – because we are people God has called into relationship, because we are people called into mission alongside our God, and because we are people God promises to be with - always - in God's great work of destroying the forces of death and creating the conditions for life to flourish.

As I mentioned at the beginning - we all have origin stories we bring to the story of this church. Can I invite you now to share (just with the person next to you or those around you) how you came to be at this church?

And then perhaps to say – what is your prayer – what has God laid on your heart – put in your mouth – for the ongoing ministry of this church?