

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"
Jeremiah 1:4-10 Luke 4:14-30
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York Center Church of the Brethren
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"Finding your Roots" is tv show on PBS hosted by Harvard professor and historian , Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In each episode he provides a celebrity guest with a "book of life" that outlines their family tree going back as many generations as possible. The series uses written records as well as several types of DNA testing to uncover ancient and recent genetic relationships. Professional researchers and genealogists spend hundreds of hours researching each guest. Guests sometimes come with questions about an ancestor that no one in the family will talk about or a family myth they learn is not true.

The series sometimes brings joy as when guests are told about living relatives they never knew they had. It also brings sorrow. Many of Jewish ancestry discover relatives who were killed in the concentration camps of the Holocaust.

Quite often Black guests find their ancestry linked directly to enslaved people whose names are found on census documents of the time under "property owned."

Now and then, someone will exclaim, "This changes everything I thought I knew about myself!" Many are brought to tears when they hear a story or see a photograph of an ancestor who survived against terrible odds. Celebrities who appear on the show never know if they are going to find saints or sinners in their background. One woman discovered that she is actually descended from a long line of cattle rustlers. One famous actor's episode was never broadcast because he asked Mr. Gates to omit the information that his ancestors were slave owners. A Mexican-American man's lineage was traced back 500 hundreds to a conquistador from Spain.

I enjoy this program because of what I learn about history. I am fascinated by how much of a difference one individual can make in the lives of people they will never meet. On a recent episode, a woman discovered that her great great grandfather immigrated from Germany to Wisconsin and there, by chance, he met a young woman who would become her great great grandmother. Had he not made that move, she wouldn't be alive today.

Mr. Gates appears to enjoy unveiling long-held secrets to his guests. It is quite a privilege to help people understand who they are and where they have come from.

You know who else is always telling people who they are? God. The problem is that most of the people called by God in the Bible (and today) think they already know who they are, and it is definitely **NOT** who God says they are.

Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Sarah, Abraham, Mary were all called by God to difficult but important tasks on behalf of stubborn and selfish people, people whom God happened to love. People whom God still loves.

Jeremiah's time was one of the most troublesome in the history of God's people. And that is saying something! The political and religious structures were in a shambles, the people had been carried off to live in exile in Babylon. It was a dangerous time to be God's prophet. It was a difficult time in which to give a meaningful interpretation of the tragic events through which they were living. Since Jeremiah was telling the truth, God's truth, the people were NOT all that keen on hearing it. So not only was he in danger from the political and religious leaders but his own people gave him a hard time too.

As hard as it was though, Jeremiah stuck with it. Even in the midst of horrifying catastrophe, he was God's prophet, reminding these stubborn and selfish people that God still loved them. God's words from the mouth of Jeremiah were powerful, dangerous, and life-giving.

Through this prophet, this one flawed and vulnerable human being, God shaped the history of the nations and affected the world of international politics. One of the things I really like about this biblical portrait is that Jeremiah doesn't come off as a superhero. He is, in fact, shown as fearful, anxious, resentful, resistant, inadequate, angry, and eccentric. I can relate to that! Can't you?

The reason God's call and Jeremiah's response are so important is because, according to R.E. Clements, *"Prophecy is the divine word of hope and explanation, which is the antidote to human despair."* In a time of great despair God sent Jeremiah with important words. But mostly God sent Jeremiah with love to a sometimes, unlovable, people. When we realize, accept, and celebrate that we are known and loved by God, amazing things can happen. God's call to Jeremiah is beautifully intimate. God says, "Even before there was any you to love, I loved you. I knew who you would become. I chose you."

Jeremiah cries out with very familiar doubts, "Not me, God. You are thinking of someone else! I can't speak. I am just a kid." But God had it all figured out. "You will go where I send you and say what I tell you. No need to be afraid. I will always be with you." And before Jeremiah can object again, God touched his mouth and said, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. It's a done deal." And off Jeremiah goes to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, but also to build and to plant.

Jeremiah didn't choose to be a prophet. He was chosen. By God. Like Jeremiah, God calls us as we are and then helps us to become who we are meant to be as we engage in God's mission and ministry in this world God loves so much.

When we turn to the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus claiming his identity in front of people who already thought they knew who he was. Luke tells us that Jesus was baptized and then tested in the wilderness and then, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, he went home. He taught in various places around the region of Galilee and was getting good reviews by everyone. Then he came to his hometown of Nazareth and, as he always did, because he was a devout Jew, he went to the synagogue. He requested a particular scroll, unrolled it, and read from the prophet Isaiah.

The ancient words he read were very familiar to his hearers. *"God's Spirit is upon me; God's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor. Sent me to announce pardon to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind. To set the burdened and battered free. To announce, 'This is God's year to act!'"* (The Message)

But then Jesus changed everything when he said, "Today, right here, right now, these words have come true." He couldn't have made his identity and his purpose any clearer. Luke says everyone was amazed even though a few asked, "Isn't this Joseph's son? The carpenter? Didn't you go to school with him?"

If Jesus had left it at that everyone would have been happy and excited to see him, but he didn't. Instead, he said, "You all are expecting me to perform the miracles you have been hearing about from around Galilee, aren't you? But I will not do anything miraculous here."

Then he reminds them of two stories from their scriptures where two prophets perform healing miracles, not for Jewish people, but for foreigners, hated Gentiles. He told two stories of God healing all the wrong people. His neighbors in Nazareth were filled with rage because Jesus proclaimed a grace that was wider and more generous than they were. And that is when the once adoring crowd turns on him and tries to throw him off a cliff.

His hometown people aren't angry because Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of God's power. They are angry because he will not use that power the way they want him to.

In case the readers of Luke's Gospel aren't clear about who Jesus is, Luke includes 15 verses in chapter three that trace his lineage from Joseph the whole way back to Adam. His Jewish genealogy couldn't be any clearer. And in case there is any question about his theological DNA, Luke includes the song of his mother, often called Mary's Magnificat, in chapter one. She sings of God who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; who has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." She sang her song of God's great reversal even as Jesus grew in her womb.

Thirty years later when Jesus reads the ancient words from the prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue, he is claiming those words as his birthright and his purpose. With these bold words he is revealing who he is, what he will do, and for whom he has come.

With this passage Luke is proving that Jesus isn't just making this stuff up. Through the scroll of Isaiah, Luke situates Jesus' ministry in the ongoing promise and commitment of God to the lowliest of God's children, to those who have faith in God from generation to generation, to the hungry, to the needy, to the weak.

So, if God is forever telling people who they are- who is God telling you that **you** are? You aren't called to be Jeremiah or Jesus- those roles are already taken. God is calling you to be the you-est that you can be. God loved you before there was even a you to love. God knew who you were before anyone even knew there would be a you.

So, what does God's call mean in your life? Most of us are not be called to be pastors or prophets. But all of us are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, faithful people who are willing to try their best to live as though the words of Jesus are true. We are called to love one another, to care about our neighbors and our enemies, to speak the truth.

We are called to show compassion and grace in all that we do- and we do a lot-- like caring for your own children and grandchildren, ringing up groceries at Jewel, teaching a classroom full of wiggling kids- little and big ones, checking inventory in a warehouse, answering emergency medical calls in an ambulance, testing drugs in a chemistry lab, consulting with professional groups, providing pastoral care in a hospital, healing bodies on a covid unit or your chiropractic table or in the emergency room, recommending library books, researching, writing, reading, teaching music, making beautiful instruments, planting gardens, riding horses, scooping ice cream, supporting your family members, clearing snow for your neighbor, providing customer service at Target, working on your computer from home, fixing the door and a leak at the church, checking financial accounts, managing a CVS, providing mental health care, being a pastor to the pastors of our district, caring for animals, writing a note, making a phone call, delivering a meal, knitting, preparing worship centers in the sanctuary, playing the piano to enhance our worship.

Do you see how we are called?

Do you see how your actions can make a difference in the life of someone else?

Do you see how your life matters? To God, to your family, to us, to the world, to people you will never meet?

Do you see that you can be the antidote to human despair? That you can offer the grace and love of Jesus Christ that could change someone's life?

Who do you think you are?

God knows!

Amen.