

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 3rd, 2019
Rev. Michael S. Plank
Hudson Falls, NY

“Ordinary Heroes”

Text: *Jeremiah 1:4-5a: “The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart;’”*

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Proposition: I propose to experientially show that our divine creation gives us far more agency and power than we realize to the end that hearers find, embrace, and act on a deeper call in their lives.

Prayer for Illumination: Loving God, you are the source of all knowledge and wisdom. As we hear your Word, you ask you to share a portion of that knowledge and wisdom with us so that we might understand what you say. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Scriptural Context: The prophet Jeremiah preached in Judah in the years leading up to and following the destruction of Jerusalem. Listen to God’s Word in how he describes his call to ministry.

My mom went to El Salvador this past summer, and she brought back for Harvey a little leather pouch on a keyring. It’s got that real leather smell to it, and it has that rawhide stitching around the edges. He loves putting stuff in it, as any little kid would. It disappeared for a while, but the other day he found it and was thrilled. He was wearing this pair of drawstring track pants, and he started examining his pants and then he got sad because he didn’t have a belt loop to put his pouch on. Being the quick-thinking parent that I am, I said, “No problem! I can just tie it right here on your drawstring,” which would have put it right in the center of the front of his waist band. And he almost started crying, and he said “No! People

will think it's funny!" And that is the first time I have ever heard him vocalize that he didn't want to do something because he thought people might laugh at him.

This is new. He's started to care about what other people think. He's started to care about doing things "the regular way," having shoes like other kids, wearing things like other kids. And a part of that is normal development of course: he's learning the cultural norms, and learning about belonging, and that's all good. But another part is that he's starting to learn about self-doubt. Not the good kind, where when he sees a squirrel jump from a tree to a roof he says, "I could *not* do that!" but the bad kind, the kind laced with judgment, the kind that says, "What if I'm not enough?"

I think part of the innocence of childhood is that it isn't spoiled yet by things like that. It isn't tainted with that thing that all of us adults struggle with where we start to seek validation from outside sources, often compulsively; because otherwise, how can we possibly be sure that we are worthy of love and dignity and respect?

I don't know that there's much point in complaining about it. It is the way it is. And I don't really have any problem with Harvey coming up against struggles in life. In fact, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't created minor struggles for him to deal with already. I think human fulfillment comes from engaging struggle and triumphing over it. But this particular

struggle: this one that centers around judgment and self-doubt that we all encounter sooner or later, is so painful and so dangerous – it can literally be a life-and-death battle – I wouldn't mind if he could have just kept it at bay for a few more years.

But eventually we all find that struggle; or maybe it finds us. It comes early. It's how Jeremiah begins his ministry, which means that for him, it surely came way before that. God came to him and echoed the psalms and said "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (cf. Psalm 139); "I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). And what does Jeremiah say? "'Ah, Sovereign LORD,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child'" (v. 6).

Maybe he was. The text isn't actually clear on his exact age. But even if he was a child, he was no slouch. His dad was a man named Hilkiah, and he was a priest. He served in Anathoth, a city only about 3 miles north of Jerusalem. It was one of the 48 cities that had been set aside way back and given to the tribe of Levi. The Levites were priests. They served God and therefore did not have their own tribal territories. Instead they had these cities within the territories of the other tribes. So Jeremiah grew up as the son of a priest in a culture that held priests in extremely high esteem, and grew up in a city that was set apart as a place for these cultural elites. Ah, but self-doubt and self-judgment don't discriminate, do they?

Because they're not about reality. They're not about hearing the truth about who you are and what you're capable of. They're about hearing the lies that people and culture tell you. God, the Sovereign Lord, the Creator of the Universe, the Ancient of Days, came to Jeremiah and said, "Before I formed you in the womb" – not before you were conceived, but before *I* formed you – before that, "I knew you." "Before you were born I set you apart." I had plans for you, I chose you and picked you out specifically even before your eyes saw the light for the first time. Way back then, "I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (v. 5). I've known since you the beginning, it was I who formed you in the womb, I who brought you into the world, I who chose you before any of that happened, and I who decided that you would be the exact right person to do my work. And Jeremiah says, "I don't think I'm good enough."

Maybe it was modesty. But I don't think so. Because the voice of the Lord has come to us too. The voice of the Lord has told us the same thing it told Jeremiah: I've known since you the beginning, it was I who formed you in the womb, I who brought you into the world, I who chose you before any of that happened, and I who decided that you would be the exact right person to do my work. But what have we said? "What if I'm not enough?"

What if I'm not good enough? What if I'm not smart enough? What if people don't like me enough? What if I fail? Actually that's not true. Most of us haven't asked those questions. Most of us have just answered them

with complete confidence. We've said, "No, not me. I know I'm not good enough. I know I'm not smart enough. I know I'm not capable enough. I know people don't like me enough. I know that if I do this, if I step out of this safe little cave I've made for myself people might see who I really am and they won't like it. I will fail. No. No, God, not me." And so that thing... that thing you *know* you're supposed to do... that book you've wanted to write, that image you've wanted to paint, that song you've wanted to sing, that venture you've wanted to undertake, that conversation you've wanted to have... that thing that you *know* you're supposed to do but that you're afraid to do... it stays undone.

Because we're afraid. Like Jeremiah, we say, "don't tell me that, God." And you might even be saying now "don't tell me that, Michael. Don't tell me I'm supposed to go do that thing." But you know that if you did it, it really could change everything. You could fail. You could lose friends. You could get hurt. God's call isn't always a safe one. There was collateral damage in Jeremiah's call. "I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow" (v. 10). But it's also to build and to plant, to make the world a better place.

That was Jeremiah's call. That's your call too. Odds are good that you're not called to be a prophet to the nations. But you *are* called to build and plant and make the world better. I know you don't think you are. I know you don't think you have what it takes, but you do. Right now.

You may not have all the skills yet, but you can learn skills. You may not have all the capital yet, but you can gain capital. What you do have is the only quintessential thing that you need, the spirit to do it. And I'm not saying that you're perfect just the way you are, because you are not. But there is a small something within you that is. And that something is the spark of the divine. That something is the thing that caused God to claim you before you were born, and to say way back then, "this one will be perfect for this."

And every once in a great while, that call comes to someone who says "yes." God comes to someone and says, I chose you, I appointed you, I want you to build and plant and make the world better in this way. And that person says, "yes. I believe that if you called me, you must have given me the tools I need." And they go out and they do it. And do you know what we call those people? We call them heroes. We call them saints. And all they are, are people who shut down the lies of self-doubt and self-judgment long enough to say yes.

They are the Jeremiahs who agreed to speak God's words of truth to power. They are the artists and poets who agreed to share the creative power of the Spirit. They are the innovators and leaders who agreed to show the world what was in their hearts. They are the grandparents who agreed to love the grandchildren that were thrust into their care. They are the teachers who agreed to do their best work with every student. They are the strangers who agreed to smile at people who were having hard days.

They are the foster parents who agreed to share their resources with some kids who needed a little extra.

And those saints, those heroes, have saved marriages, changed lives, altered the course of history, prevented suicides, stopped cycles of abuse and addiction; they have built, they have planted, they have made this world a better place. And they are just like you and me. **Amen.**