

Who, me? Yes, you!
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
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Scripture: Psalm 139:13-16
Jeremiah 1:4-10

Today we will ordain and install a new class of elders to join the session of Caldwell church. For all sorts of reasons, this is an important moment, another one of many occasions in the rhythms of church life and another chance to celebrate with humility and anticipation what God is doing here.

In the last few weeks, your elders-elect have prepared for this day, reflecting on their call to office and learning what that office it will require. Several of them shared their reaction when the nominating committee called them to ask them to prayerfully consider their nomination.

In just about as many words, their response was, "Who, me?"

And in just about as many words, the person offering the nomination on your behalf said, "Yes, you!"

In this exchange, these friends of ours took their place in a long line of God's servants who had the same reaction. Moses, Gideon, Isaiah and Ezekiel all had the same initial reaction to God's call, in their own words.

"Surely you don't mean me! You can do a whole lot better than me. If you really knew me, you'd know that I am not the one for the job. If you want some recommendations of others, I'd be glad to offer some. But you don't really mean me!"

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That's the way it happened with the great prophet Jeremiah, as we heard in scripture. One day the word of the Lord came to him. But Jeremiah's reaction was quick, as Eugene Peterson translates it in his contemporary Bible called the message:

"Hold it, Master God! Look at me. I don't know anything. I am only a boy!" (Jeremiah. 1:6)

Scholars have determined that Jeremiah was about 18 when God spoke to him, so he was not literally a boy. But he was the son of a priest and his response may have reflected his awareness that he had so much more to know to be an effective prophet, much less, perhaps, the skill, experience, drive and sacrifice it would require.

This was no ordinary call amid no ordinary time, to be sure. It was about 600 BC. Samaria had fallen in 721 at the hands of the pagan Babylonians and now Jerusalem, Israel's great holy city, was on the same path, which would complete the erasure of the Hebrew kingdom.

Taking up God's call, Jeremiah made a habit of going into the most public places and calling out God's people for turning to paganism and abandoning God's ways. He was prone to high drama. He smashed a jar against the ground to symbolize what would happen to the people of God if they didn't change their ways. At another time, he strapped a heavy wooden yoke onto his shoulders to symbolize the weight of the matters at hand. He suffered greatly for his acts, but he kept on prophesying. Shakespeare echoed Jeremiah's burden in these words, written for his character Hamlet:

"The times are out of joint – oh cursed spite that ever I was born to put them right."

Jeremiah was an extraordinary figure, called to do extraordinary things in extraordinary times.

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As I said earlier, Jeremiah was only one of many who never expected to be called to do God's work. As with so many others, he was, perhaps even in his own thinking, too, toward the bottom of any list the world might have kept of those who seemed fit to be an agent for God.

Twice in today's passage from Jeremiah, we find the word "appoint" to describe God's call on his life. According to one Hebrew scholar, "appoint" as used in this context meant to be "put into office." So, on this day when we put into office Caldwell's newest elders, we might consider their calling and how the world might consider their "suitability" for office.

As these elders-elect and I reflected on their callings, their skills, their experiences, their sense of readiness and their interests in service, more than one admitted there had been times when this hour would have been the last thing they expected.

One elder-elect grew up in the arms of the church, but later, as an adult, came to ask the hard questions about faith. This person looked hard at what it meant to be an agnostic and even an atheist.

Another elder-elect declared on several occasions an end to a relationship with the organized church. Another has seen far too closely how the church uses scripture to persecute and run off children of God, men and women whom God made differently but who only want the same kind of relationship with our creator as the rest of us.

Still another has seen the church tear itself apart and send some of its most faithful servants into the wilderness, questioning whether they ever wanted to part of the organized church again.

At another time and place in the life of the church, these men and women may well have been part of the last group to have been picked for leadership. In many places, I suppose, their experiences and perspectives would still make them untouchable, at least in the sometimes dim view of mere mortals.

Luckily we are not in charge. God is. That was the bottom line definition of God's sovereignty given by one of our elders-elect, and he was right.

At a time when the church is being pushed aside by so many secular forces, these are exactly the kind of leaders we need in the mix. At a time when our denomination is shrinking and being divided all at the same time, these are exactly the kind of leaders we need to speak truth and work for reconciliation. At a time when the church too often turns inward, these are exactly the kinds of leaders who can challenge us to get beyond ourselves and refocus on others.

These are exactly the kind of leaders the church needs because they have grappled with the hard questions about God and the organized church. They have walked in the wilderness. They have lived with the poor and experienced their struggle. They have known persecution.

And yet, they were called.

And yet, they said, "Yes."

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Now, you may be sitting out there thinking this sermon applies only to these four individuals. This is their day, this is their calling to this particular role in the church, you might tell yourself.

Or, you may be sitting out there saying you don't have the kind of relationship with God that would ever lead to your service as God's agent in the world. God isn't that interested in me, you might be thinking. Or, I haven't put in the time with God and the church for me to have a place there, much less a purpose in God's grand scheme.

In the parlance of our youth, "NOT!"

God said to Jeremiah:

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; and before you were born I consecrated you." (vs. 5)

These words echo what we heard in that wonderful psalm, Psalm 139, which assures us of how long and how deeply we have always belonged to God and God's purposes. Speaking to God, the psalmist writes:

"For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (vv. 13-14 partial)

"Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them yet existed." (vs. 16)

If we have been God's before we were formed, if we were knit together by God before ever seeing the light of day, then surely God has a role for each of us. First and foremost, that role is to be loved by God and to walk in the light of that love, as seen most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But we also have a purpose, each of us ... as surely as we are claimed and justified by God in Christ, we are sanctified to work out God's ways in lives of faith, as Veronica preached to us a few weeks ago.

That purpose may be simply to say a kind word to someone in the middle of their chaos. It may be to serve men and women who have no homes. It may be to teach our little children. It may be to paint a wall or plant a garden. It may be to speak truth to power, come what may, as Jeremiah did 2,600 years ago.

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One last thing about Jeremiah's call that is worth noting: God instructs the prophet that he appointed "to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." (vs. 10).

If we are truly listening for God's purpose, those are scary words. In Jeremiah's times, the reasons for taking that kind of radical action were more clear. God's very people, a nation, faced extinction. God's people had to be called to repentance in the most extreme ways.

Tearing down. Plucking up. Destroying. Overthrowing. It might have been warranted then but it sounds like pretty scary business to us today.

But we know in Christ that we have to die to our old selves to be made anew. That's also scary business. But it is the way God works. God calls us to pray with courage: "O Lord, break me and remake me, that I may do your will."

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Last weekend, I watched the movie "The Green Mile."

It is the story of a poor black man who has been given the gift to heal people of even the worst diseases and even to restore life. The backdrop of the story is a southern jail where men serve their days on death row until it is time for them to be executed in the electric chair. The idea of electricity, its power to energize and to kill, runs through the film as both a reality and a metaphor. In the end, a man, a jailer no less, receives such a jolt of life from the hands of the healer that he lives on, far beyond his years. The movie ends with his questions about why he was given a gift of extra life.

What will happen to these elders-elect in a few minutes is a bit like that. They will kneel and the hands of others who have been ordained will be placed on them. I speak from experience in saying that, whether they feel it or not, something will run through them. They will be different, set apart for a particular duty.

But again, in case you think this doesn't relate to you, think again. If you're thinking, "Who, me?" I am here to say, "Yes, you!"

It's been said that the word of God in scripture is like a high-voltage wire. It ought to come with a warning sign that reads, "Handle with extreme caution." That's true. So

read scripture, albeit carefully. Pay particular attention to the part about Jesus, who gave us all new life.

And may God equip us all to lead a life worthy of our calling.

Amen.