

# *A Long Time Coming*

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Psalm 71:1-6; Jeremiah 1:4-10  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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Claimed. Called. Sent.

These words are part of Lewinsville's Mission Statement, adopted a number of years ago, pointing to the fact that, as a congregation and as individuals, three things are true of us with reference to God.

We have been *claimed by God as God's own beloved*. Nothing can take that away from you. As our denomination's Brief Statement of Faith puts it, "In life and in death, we belong to God." Your place in the universe is secure. So is your neighbor's. So is your enemy's. We are claimed.

We have been *called by God*. If being claimed by God is the equivalent of being justified by grace, our being called by God is the equivalent of being sanctified by grace. We have been established in our relationships with God – that's the "being claimed" part – and now we have been called by God for particular purposes. Each individual has a particular calling in their life, each congregation has a particular calling in its life. We are called.

And we are being *sent by God into the world to live out our calling*. When we leave worship, we are not leaving on our own horsepower. We are leaving on the wind-power of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness, and just as the Heavenly Father sent Jesus Christ the Son into the world, in exactly the same way, Jesus is sending you and me into the world. We are Christ's agents, we are ambassadors serving not our own agendas, but the agenda of the king who is sending us into the world.

Claimed. Called. Sent.

What we can see from our two Old Testament texts this morning, from Psalm 71 and Jeremiah 1 is that being claimed, called, and sent is not something that Lewinsville Presbyterian came up with on its own. This is not a clever slogan that we can trademark for our purposes alone. Claimed, called, sent is a profound biblical truth that you have been claimed from all eternity by the God who has held you in the divine heart from the beginning of time, you have been called by the God who has been planning for your life at this moment forever, and you are being sent by the God who has claimed and called you for precisely this moment in history. The same God who was the refuge for the psalmist of Psalm 71, the same God who appointed Jeremiah as a

prophet to the nations, has claimed you as God's own, called you for God's purposes, and is sending you and me into our community to serve those purposes and these people at this time.

Our callings, our vocations in the world, have been a long time coming.

What you have been placed on the earth to do, what Lewinsville has been called into existence to do, is not something that we need to self-generate or make up for yourself. Your vocation, your calling, is something that you are given and that you discover. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and writer who died this past week, was renowned for giving us a definition of our vocation as the place where your deep joy and the world's deep need intersect. What is it that gives your life great joy? And what part of the world's pain cries out to your heart? How do those two relate to each other? Because you need both of them. That is the place where God is calling you to devote your life.

Jeremiah 1 is a text from the beginning of Jeremiah's life. He is described as a young boy in the text, which accounts for his resistance to God's calling. The Lord God summons Jeremiah to speak a prophetic word to the nations, to governments, including the government of his own country of Israel. And in response, Jeremiah says, "Not me. I'm too young. I can't do it." Just because your calling has been coming for a long time, doesn't mean that it's a snap to embrace it.

I don't know if you know what that feels like to resist a calling. When life invites you to some task, to some purpose, and your first reaction is "Uh-uh." I'm too young. I'm too old. I don't know enough. I'm too busy. I need to make some money first. I need to finish this degree. I need to be settled first.

One of the central tasks of discernment for us is to pay attention when something in us wants to say "No" to a particular calling. When you get excited about a calling, those are rather easy. But when we're invited to do something, and something in us says "NO!", we've got some work to do. Is that resistance coming from a holy place, from our True Self reserving our energies for what we are genuinely called to? Or is that resistance coming from a place of fear? Is it coming from a place of self-protectiveness, a place of anxiety, from our False Self or our Small Self, that is always most interested in staying safe. Jeremiah's initial response was apparently coming from that ego-protective place, because the Lord God rebuked him. "Do not say, I'm only a boy. You shall go to all to whom I send you. Do not be afraid of them, because I'm with you to deliver you."

Now this raises another important point about God's calling to us. You will notice that when Jeremiah first protested his calling, he didn't say anything about being afraid of the people to whom he was being sent. He just said, "I don't speak that well, I'm too

young." In response, the Lord goes and tells him, "Oh, you don't need to be afraid of them, I'll be with you."

Jeremiah may have wondered, "Wait. Who said anything about being afraid? Why would I need to be afraid?" Then, he may have really thought he didn't want to go.

Or, it could have been that Jeremiah's protest about not speaking too well and being too young was really just a cover. Maybe he actually *did* understand that when the Lord appointed him a prophet to the nations, that would involve speaking truth to power, bringing concerns about the well-being of the poor into the halls of royal wealth and entitlement, where those concerns would not be welcome.

When God claims us, calls us, and sends us, God is not thereby guaranteeing our safety and worldly security. It wasn't the case with Jeremiah, and it's not the case with us. God calls us to a life of meaning and vitality, but not necessarily to a life of fantastic success; God calls us to serve and to seek the kingdom of God. This misunderstanding about the life of faith keeps reoccurring. It occurs in the Bible, it has occurred down through history, and it is occurring today. There is a continuing temptation to think that biblical faith and God's calling is a ticket to our own worldly success and political power. We fell into this temptation when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire, linking the faith of Jesus tightly with worldly political power. We fall into this temptation when we think in terms of the prosperity gospel, how if we just believe, our bank accounts will suddenly become flush with cash, and everything will go the way we want. We fall into it when we long for political power for our particular tribe, so that we can enforce a religious mono-culture with ourselves at the top.

God's calling to Jeremiah, exactly like God's calling upon you and me, is about seeking and serving the kingdom of God. God's calling is about bearing witness to death and to life, about being present to the things that are passing away and to the things that are coming to be. It is about plucking up and pulling down, *and* it is about building and planting. Laying some things to rest and allowing them to come to an end, and bringing other things to new life, so that God's new world can flourish.

You and I are living in a time of massive transition and change, when it daily feels like the ground under our feet is changing. The institutions that used to feel so solid are unraveling all around us, the ties that used to bind our circles of life together are coming undone – even as we are coming to realize that not all of those ties were completely life-giving, and that some of those ties excluded an awful lot of people from the circle. We may imagine that God has been planning for Lewinsville's role in this time of unraveling, transition, and change for a very long time. Our calling has been a long time coming.

When the psalmist says "I take refuge in you, O Lord," and when the psalmist says, "you are my rock and my fortress," a most powerful claim is being made. The

Lord is a refuge and a fortress for us, but it is a very peculiar kind of fortress. The mighty fortress that is our God is not a fortress of popularity or position or wealth or power, that will protect us from the difficulties of the world, from the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.' The mighty fortress of God is a cross, where we are exposed with Christ to the pain and the sadness of the world. And what we will discover is that, as we sink down into the knowledge that we are claimed, called, and sent by God, it will provide us, like Jeremiah before us, with deep enough roots that will enable us to serve God forever.

To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Now and always. Amen.