

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Epiphany 4, Series C
Saturday, January 29th, 2022
Sunday, January 30th, 2022

Sermon: Known by God (Jeremiah's Call and Yours)

Text: Jeremiah 1:4-19; 1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13.

Focus: God knew everything about us even before we were born.

Function: That they would rest in the wonder of God's intimate knowledge of them.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Today's Old Testament lesson is one of my favorite passages of Scripture. I have a hunch that most pastors resonate with the prophet Jeremiah, because his book is the most personal of all the Prophets. The prophet Jeremiah tells more about himself than does any other prophet, even Daniel or Jonah—and he often does it in the first person. The Book of Jeremiah gives us a real glimpse behind the curtain into the life and ministry of a preacher persecuted for his message. Because of his many prayers and complaints about his suffering, Jeremiah is sometimes nicknamed The Weeping Prophet. And a long list of grievances is sometimes called a jeremiad.

Jeremiah served during the twilight years of the Davidic monarchy. He witnessed the last glimmer of hope under the boy-king Josiah, and he foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. He outlasted several kings (Jer. 1:1-3). But here in chapter one, we go back to the very beginning of Jeremiah's ministry, when God first called him to be a prophet.

“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’” (Jer. 1:4-5, ESV).¹

Jeremiah's call begins on God's initiative and by God's action. The LORD God, Yahweh, is the subject of four important verbs: *form*, *know*, *consecrate*, and *appoint*. Even before conception and birth, God already had a plan and a purpose for his life: to call him to faith and to call him into the prophetic office. These verses remind us of other passages of Scripture which celebrate God's wonderful gift of life. “On

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, come from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God” (Ps. 22:10). And here is Psalm 139:

*“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them” (Ps. 139:14-16).*

The clear evidence of Scripture is that God regards all human life as sacred from womb to tomb. Even the unborn are persons in God’s sight. But my purpose today is not to preach a pro-life sermon. Rather, today I wish to emphasize that God has a plan and purpose for each and every person’s life here on earth—including yours and mine.

Part of the problem with our time in history is a lack of purpose or possibility. Our post-Christian culture is full of loneliness and hopelessness. Teen suicide rates rocketed upward even before the pandemic, and now the isolation and anxiety of covid-19 have driven those numbers up even higher. Our public-school system teaches the

theory of evolution as veritable fact without any consideration for the philosophical implications of such a worldview—that if we are truly statistical anomalies that are the result of chance, then our life has no ultimate meaning or higher purpose. We are merely the most evolved animals on the planet. Then it is the law of the jungle, and we realize that Nietzsche was right: only the will to power matters in the end. And that kind of nihilism festers in the hallways of academia and infects our children’s hearts and minds. This generation is facing an existential crisis: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose for my existence?

The current youth generation is Gen Z, people born after 1999. The only world they have ever known has been one full of terrorism and mass shootings, the Great Recession of 2008, and the deadliest pandemic of the past 100 years. They live their lives virtually through anti-social media and suffer from cyber bullies. Boys and girls cannot even be certain anymore whether they are boys or girls, because of the persistent promulgation of the LGBT agenda that encourages kids to question everything, including their own sexuality. “From the beginning

God made them male and female” (Matt. 19:4). And the first humans were made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27). But these days, many teens don’t even believe in God. According to Barna research, fully one-third of them have no religious affiliation whatsoever, and they are twice as likely as the generations before them to become atheists. Is it any wonder that they are resigning themselves to despair and tragically taking their own lives?

But God’s call to Jeremiah today is a call for us to view ourselves through a different lens: the lens of divine love and mercy. Yahweh is the one who forms us, knows us, consecrates us, and appoints us for his purposes. He is the one who gives meaning to life by forgiving our sins and calling us into right relationship with him through the cross of Christ.

God *forms* us in the womb. The Hebrew verb יָצַר means to make something with intentionality and design in mind. It’s the same verb used to speak of the creation of Adam, when God got his hands dirty and literally made mud to fashion and form the first man (Gen. 2:7-8). The

participle of the same verb is the Hebrew word for “potter.” A potter is one who *forms* clay. Thus a potter is called a “form-er-er” in Hebrew. Just as a potter has intention in mind when she makes a plate or cup or vase, so God has intent when he makes you. There is nothing haphazard or accidental about your birth. Yahweh knit you together in your mother’s womb, no matter who your father may have been. Your life is a special miracle. So, take *that*, Darwin!

God also *knows* us—even before conception and birth. The Hebrew verb יָדַע has wide-ranging application in the Old Testament. It certainly has the basic sense of knowledge and being aware of certain facts. But it is also used euphemistically to speak of sexual intercourse (cf. Gen. 4:17, 25). Thus, when a man “knows” his wife, it implies much more than just knowing her name or information *about* her. But this intimate knowledge also applies to God. In Psalm 1:6, we read that “Yahweh [is] knowing the way of the righteous, but the way of the guilty will perish” (Ps. 1:6, CSM). The LORD *knows* the way of the righteous. His eye is on all who fear and trust in him. He knows the

number of hairs on your head (or, in the case of some men, the *lack* of hairs!). He keeps count of your tears in a bottle (Ps. 56:8). Before a word is on your tongue, he knows it already (Ps. 139:4). Every single day of your life was written in his book even before you were born (Ps. 139:16). *Nothing* in your life happens by chance, luck, fortune, or fate. God knows everything about you and pays attention to every aspect of your life because he *cares for you*: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

God also consecrates us. The Hebrew verb קָדַשׁ means that he makes us “holy,” that is, he sets us apart for a special purpose. In the Bible, the word holy doesn’t mean “pure” or “unblemished.” It means “set apart.” God consecrates us, he *sanctifies us*, he makes us holy through Baptism and his Word. But to what end? If we are set apart for a special purpose, then what *is* our purpose?

That is the existential question to which this generation seeks an answer—an answer that only God can grant. I like the first question and

answer in the *Westminster Short Catechism*: “What is man’s chief end? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” But Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* is even better: “I believe that Jesus Christ, my Lord..., has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person..., that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed). In other words, our ultimate purpose in life is to *belong* to God—to belong to *Jesus* by right of his redemption on the cross, by which he paid for us by “his holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death.”

Our ultimate purpose is to believe in Christ and be saved: “Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’” (John 6:29). God calls us to faith when he pours out his Holy Spirit on us in Baptism and through the preaching of the Word to create faith in our hearts that clings to Christ. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Yet even this wonderful gift of grace is not a trophy to put on display, but a gift to use in blessing others. “For we are his

workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls himself the Light of the World. And in Matthew’s Gospel, he calls *us*—the Church—the light of the world:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14-16).

Jesus’ light shines in you, so let your light shine for others! (By the way, this verse is the inspiration for our outreach campaign, “Shining the Light of Christ in Castle Rock!”) Our purpose in life is threefold: (1) to believe in Jesus; (2) to love God; and (3) to love and serve our neighbor. We are consecrated for this purpose.

Finally, God *appoints* us to a task. He lays a calling, or vocation, upon our lives. The Hebrew verb ָׁׁן translated as “appoint” in Jeremiah 1:5 is the basic verb that means “to give.” Not only does Yahweh *appoint* Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations, but he *gives him* as a prophet to the nations. In other words, God’s gift of life is not only a

blessing to Jeremiah, but Jeremiah himself becomes God's gift to the world around him. (*Aside:* By the way, נתן is also the Hebrew word from which we derive the name, Nathan or Nathanael, which means "God gives").

Dear friends in Christ, *your* life is a gift to the people in the world around *you*. Never consider yourself unimportant or non-essential. Nobody is unimportant. Everybody matters to God. That is why he sent his Son Jesus to die and rise again *for you*. "For God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God so loved the world means that God so loved *you*—and every other person on this planet. Nobody is a nobody to God. He has a plan and a purpose for every person.

In the final verses of our Old Testament reading today, Yahweh strengthens and equips Jeremiah for his call by speaking his Word. So also we are strengthened and equipped for our task by reading and hearing the Word of God.

At first Jeremiah was afraid of his calling. “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth” (Jer. 1:6). Jeremiah borrowed a line from Moses and claimed that he wasn’t good at public speaking. He also claimed that he was too young for the job.

God didn’t buy it. Yahweh would not take “no” for an answer. You are never too young or too old for the work God has given for you to do. And it doesn’t matter how skilled or unschooled you are, God can use anybody. He used an octogenarian outlaw (Moses) to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. He used the youngest son of a father who almost forgot him (David) to establish his kingdom. And he used a young girl named Mary to bring the Son of God into the world. Gideon was hiding in a threshing pit when the Lord appeared to him. Clearly, God does not call the qualified. Rather, he qualifies the ones he calls.

So we have no excuse to shirk our calling. God formed us, knows us, consecrates us, and appoints us. He forgives our sins and strengthens us by his Word and Sacraments. He has a plan and a purpose for you. “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’”

(Jer. 29:11, NIV). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.