

Sermon for January 31, 2016 - 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10 (NIV84)

**Theme: Don't be afraid of confessing Christ.**

- 1) *The LORD has set you apart.*
- 2) *The LORD promises to be with you.*
- 3) *The LORD has given you the words to say.*

<sup>4</sup> *The word of the LORD came to me, saying,* <sup>5</sup> *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."* <sup>6</sup> *"Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."* <sup>7</sup> *But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you."* <sup>8</sup> *Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.* <sup>9</sup> *Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth."* <sup>10</sup> *See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."*

Imagine a Christian friend of yours has fallen into some sort of unrepentant sin (like living with their boy or girl friend outside of marriage) and you have firsthand knowledge of it. How comfortable would you feel talking to them about their relationship with God?

I'd tell you how I'd feel: terrified! Yes, you heard me correctly: I would feel down right terrified talking to someone else about their sin. Why? Probably for the same reasons you would! Wouldn't I be a hypocrite – warning them of their sins, when I am far from perfect? What should I say? How and when should I say it? What if they get mad at me? What if I make things worse – pushing them away from Christ because of their perception of me being “judgmental”?

Do any of those excuses sound familiar?

“Well pastor,” someone might be thinking, “you better get over those fears because it is your job to warn those living in unrepentant sin; and I have a long list of people for you to warn . . .”

Wait a second: whose job is it to initially warn someone caught in sin? Did Jesus say: "If your brother sins against you, go and show his fault to the pastor"? No, he said: *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."*<sup>1</sup>

We all have the duty of being our brothers' keeper – watching over each others' souls. If you have firsthand knowledge of someone living in impenitent sin, God does not want you to get someone else to talk to that person. He wants you to talk to them yourself. It is only if our one-on-one call to repentance fails that we should get another Christian (like a pastor or an elder) involved to help.

“Are you kidding me?” someone might be thinking, “There is no way I would confront a friend with their sin!”

Then, let me ask you this: If you saw a child about to run onto the street that a truck is driving down, would you stop the child? Of course you would. You wouldn't want a child to die if you could have saved it! Then why wouldn't you also want to prevent a Christian friend from dying eternally in hell because of their impenitent sin?

“But who am I to do this? Isn't their sin between them and their God?” Not when you have firsthand knowledge of it.

The LORD has called all of us to be his ambassadors to our family, friends and neighbors. With the calling of Jeremiah as our example, let us consider how he equips and help us to accomplish this task, under the theme: **Don't be afraid of confessing Christ.** 1) *The LORD has set you apart.* 2) *The LORD promises to be with you.* 3) *The LORD has given you the words to say.*

Part One: *The LORD has set you apart.*

Jeremiah lived during a sad time in Jewish history. They had fallen into such gross idolatry that some of them even sacrificed their own children to foreign gods. Even though Josiah, the king who reigned when Jeremiah was born, tried to spark a reformation, God saw what was in the hearts of his people, and it was not good. This is why the LORD commissioned Jeremiah to speak all the words He would give him, so as to warn Judah – lest they fall under God's eternal judgment for their continued, impenitent idolatry.

Jeremiah writes: <sup>4</sup> *The word of the LORD came to me, saying,* <sup>5</sup> *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart."*

What the LORD said of Jeremiah could have easily been said of each one of us. Before forming us in our mother's womb, the LORD knew each one of us completely and chose to save us - not because of how “perfect” and “god pleasing” we would be. No, he knew the opposite to be true: that we would be born in sin - slaves to worldly passions. And yet, in spite of who we would be, God chose us to be his dearly loved children whom he would redeem for himself through Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. He formed us in our mother's wombs– individually giving us all the abilities and disabilities he determined us to have that we might accomplish his will for our lives.

God knew, chose, and formed you into the person you are today. He set you apart as someone who would become his dearly loved child through Baptism. He did this for a purpose: that you might live for his glory and not your own

The LORD told Jeremiah: *I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."*

Now, it is certainly true that none of us were appointed to be “prophets” the way Jeremiah was. We all have different vocations in life – callings that God wants us to pursue to his glory.

Pastors and elders, for example, are specifically called by God to watch over his people – warning them of the dangers of sin and unbelief. At the same time, God has called all Christians to be his ambassadors<sup>ii</sup> - desiring that our words and actions confess his glory to others.<sup>iii</sup>

So, in a certain sense, we are like Jeremiah, for we are God’s royal priests in the world – chosen, redeemed and appointed by the LORD himself to reflect his love and proclaim his salvation in all we say and do. And since the LORD himself has formed us for this task at our very conception, there is no reason we should be afraid of confessing Christ to our family, friends and neighbors – especially the ones who have fallen into unrepentant sin.

### Part Two: *The LORD promises to be with you.*

Now, just because there is no reason for us to be afraid of calling our friends to repentance and faith, doesn’t mean we aren’t. We know our sins and weaknesses all too well. We aren’t pastors, but inexperienced lay people who haven’t received theological training for this kind of work. Wouldn’t it be better if someone with more experience did it?

This was, in effect, Jeremiah’s answer to God: *"Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."* Based on how long Jeremiah’s ministry was, it doesn’t sound like he was exaggerating. Most people think that Jeremiah was around 20 years old when the LORD called him, and quite possibly even less!

Could you imagine the LORD appearing to you, just after you graduated from high school, telling you that He has made you his special prophet whom he chose to go before Congress and the Senate to condemn this nation for all its godlessness?

If you can imagine this, then you can imagine Jeremiah’s call and can sympathize with his fear and astonishment. “LORD, you have the wrong guy. Send someone else.”

But listen to how the LORD responds to Jeremiah: *"Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.*

It is as if God were saying: “Your inexperience and fear are no excuse, Jeremiah, and I don’t want to hear you mention them again. Why not? Because I am the one who chose, formed and appointed you for this purpose from the creation of the world. This is not a job interview. You will go to whomever I, your heavenly Father, send you – speaking to them the very words I give you?”

When Jeremiah let his fear get in the way of obeying God, he sinned – and so do we when we act like the reluctant prophet. God has graciously given us every gift necessary to carry out his purpose for our lives. Making excuses instead of doing what God says is not only a sin, it is a sign of unbelief – showing that we don’t trust God enough to watch over us as we do what he commands.

This is why, after a swift rebuke, the LORD offers Jeremiah a wonderful promise to strengthen his faith: <sup>8</sup> *Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.*

This promise applies to you too, dear Christian: Don't be afraid of how your friends react as you reach out to them in love - pleading with them to repent of their sins and turn back to Christ in faith. The almighty LORD who created this awesome universe stands beside you – ever ready to rescue you at a moment's notice.

Yes, the Almighty LORD is with us as we confess Christ to the straying, but please understand this verse in its proper perspective. It does not mean our ministry will be easy. Jesus has clearly said that, for his sake, we can expect trouble on this earth. Jeremiah's ministry is a vivid demonstration of this fact - being despised, slandered, accused of treason and imprisoned for warning Judah of their sin. But, through it all, the LORD stood by him - giving him unseen victory after unseen victory, rescuing him from every evil he had to suffer.

And what the LORD did for Jeremiah, he will also do for us. Our task of calling a straying brother or sister to repentance is never easy, but it is the LORD's will that we do it. He promises to stand by us through it all - rescuing us from every danger that threatens our body and soul. More than this, he promises to give us the very words to say.

Part Three: *The LORD has given you the words to say.*

Jeremiah writes: *Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup> See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."*

Could you imagine what that would have been like: the Almighty LORD touching your lips to reassure you that He has given you His Word! Now, it is true that Jeremiah was given God's Word in a very special way. The Holy Spirit verbally inspired His message. His prophecies of God's judgment and grace for Judah, Egypt, Babylon and all the other nations surrounding him were very specific and all came true. At the same time, what God did for Jeremiah, he also does for us.

No, none of us are verbally inspired, nor have we felt God physically touch our lips. But he has given us His Word and Spirit. He also has given us the same twofold task that He gave Jeremiah: first of all to use his Law to uproot and tear down the sinful pride in a person's heart that prevents them from repenting of their sin and turning to Jesus for forgiveness. And when that has been accomplished, to use the Gospel of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf to plant and build - that is, to forgive, comfort, encourage and strengthen a repentant Christian in their relationship with God through faith in Christ Jesus.

Members of Immanuel: what do you say to your Christian friend or family member who is straying from God? You don't have to wonder: it's all right here in the Bible. Simply speak the truth in love: showing them their sins and the spiritual danger they are in from God's Word - pleading with them to repent. And when they do repent? Show them the forgiveness that is

theirs in Christ Jesus: how he suffered and died for all their sins so that they might be at peace with God and live with him forever in heaven. It is all right here in the Word.

So, don't be afraid to confess Christ to your family, friends and neighbors - calling them to repentance and faith. Why not? Because, as you have learned: *The LORD has set you apart for this work. He promises to be with you and he promises to give you the very words you are to say.* Find comfort in these facts and gladly do the work God has given you - ever remembering what he says about it: *My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*<sup>iv</sup> Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 18:15 NIV84

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20,

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:16, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:17, 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>iv</sup> James 5:19, 20 NIV84