

**“Simply Irresistible”**  
**Texts: Psalm 139:1-12, Jeremiah 1:4-10**  
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*“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”*  
*Jeremiah 1:8*

You have to feel sorry for the prophet Jeremiah. We don't know how old he was. We do know he thought he was too young. Without warning or permission, the voice of God comes to him, announcing that before he was even born, he had been sanctified and appointed as a prophet. His weak attempt at resistance is futile, and before the end of this first chapter of his story God offers him this reassuring promise: “The people will fight against you, but they won't prevail.”

His head still spinning from the experience, trying to remember those words God spoke. Pluck up...pull down...destroy...overthrow... Jeremiah is sent to begin his career as a prophet to the people of Judah. The words he must speak to the people are not easy words. In fact, Jeremiah spends his entire life's energy calling the people of God to get their words and actions in proper alignment. He expresses God's frustration that those who call themselves religious are leaving their faith at the door of the sanctuary. They are self-righteous and ostentatious in worship but fail to live out the ethical commands of their theology. They preach justice but do not live justly. They are moving too quickly down the wrong path. And they are going into exile in Babylon. The prophet's message is devastating.

But his context is even more challenging. Jeremiah must speak these words to his own people—his aunts and uncles and cousins and classmates. His role as prophet forces him to predict the destruction of the land that he loves and the exile of his own family. Jeremiah is tormented by the responsibilities of being a prophet in his homeland. Perhaps Jesus himself was reflecting on Jeremiah's pain when he recited a well-known First Century aphorism: “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown.” How true that was for Jeremiah and how much he suffered bringing painful news to those whom he loved.

No wonder he resists. Like Moses, Jonah, Isaiah, and so many others (maybe even a few of us), Jeremiah tries to deny the call of God. His objection is that he is too young to speak words of power and truth to God's people. It is an interesting (and tempting!) excuse. One of my favorite lines ever written is the one that begins Reinhold Niebuhr's published diary, “Leaves from the Notebook of Tamed Cynic,” which the great theologian wrote when he was a young pastor twenty-three years of age. Niebuhr begins his journal, “There is something ludicrous about a callow young fool like myself standing up to preach a sermon to

these good folks.”<sup>i</sup> I resemble those remarks. So does Jeremiah—I am only a boy.

In the book of Exodus, Moses famously objects five different times to call of God from the burning bush, using creative excuses about oratorical skill and lack of credibility. His final objection is the most desperate and direct—“O Lord, please send someone else” (Exodus 4:13). Have you been there?

But that is precisely the point when it comes to vocation and call. There is no one else. No one else possesses your unique gifts and experiences. No one else fits into the puzzle of life in the spot meant for you. Despite our attempts at resistance, God’s call is persistent and patient.

One of the great pillars of the Reformed theological tradition, of which our church is a part, is the affirmation of God’s irresistible grace. We cannot outrun the grace and the presence of God. Where can I go to get away from you, the Psalmist asks. The answer: nowhere. “I come to the end—I am still with you.”

Speaking to a group of Presbyterians last week, I made the comment that I believe, with great confidence, that our specific theology is what American culture needs most in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After the speech, one of the listeners approached me with deliberate speed. In fact, I was convinced he was going to run me over. “How can you say that?” he boomed, “Our churches are suffering in every way! Lost money, lost members, lost influence, lost unity. Clearly Presbyterian theology has had its day. Sometime in the 1950s we fell behind the times. It’s just not what people are looking for. We need something new.”

Maybe my new friend is right, but I don’t think so. I believe with all my heart that we need to find new ways to reach people in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, that we need to be creative and energetic and inclusive and prophetic and engaged and forward thinking. But I also believe that the sturdiest truths of our faith, if we boldly and humbly proclaim them, will be a breath of fresh air and an answer to the emptiness that so many experience today.

The irresistible grace of God. In a culture that insists that we must pursue what we most desire, that we must have relentless and unending drive in order to attain success, love, happiness, and even salvation, we have this gospel truth to share: God pursues you. You need not chase the Holy Spirit down because the spirit of God is coming toward you. As Paul Tillich preached many years ago ““You are accepted! ... accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.”<sup>ii</sup> The first move is always from God to us and not the other way around.

Jeremiah’s call demonstrates this truth. God pursues Jeremiah before the young man even has a chance to consider his options, or call his mother, or read the contract. He is given a vocation that is difficult and trying at ever turn. But there

is, with the call, a promise. It comes in verse eight, it comes from the voice of God: "I am with you." That's all, and that is everything. It is all Jeremiah needs to know and so he begins the work that has been given him. He speaks the difficult words of judgment. Then he goes with the people of Judah into exile in Babylon and there he speaks words of hope and promise. Having experienced the irresistible grace of God, Jeremiah can now deliver this good news to the people: "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." Confident in a pursuing God, Jeremiah clears his throat and pursues his own vocation in the world.

We can do the same. Because of the unfailing promises of God, we have the freedom to pursue with passion our vocation in the world. All of us have been chosen, set aside, sanctified, called, and commissioned for ministry. The priesthood of all believers, it's another one of those sturdy theological truths that we proclaim. We have all been given ministries to pursue in the world.

Parker Palmer has written a wonderful little book entitled, "Let Your Life Speak." In the book, Palmer describes a discovery that he has made late in life, that "the primary vocational question is not, 'what should I do with my life,' but rather, 'whom am I now?'"<sup>iii</sup> It is a question that we can all ask, no matter where in life we find ourselves. And the most basic answer to this very personal question is in fact universal. Who are you now? You are a child of God. Your life is a gift that you have been given and you are called to give it back in gratitude to God.

The most wonderful and comprehensive definition of vocation I have ever encountered comes from the Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner: "vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."<sup>iv</sup> I would only add this: once you have discovered that sweet spot, where your joy intersects with the world's need, pursue it with all your passion.

One of my personal heroes is a man named Paul Farmer. I met Dr. Farmer when he came to speak at Duke University, his alma mater, in the summer of 2004. His life had just been the subject of a powerful book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, written by Tracy Kidder, and the two of them came to give a joint lecture. Farmer and I share a love for the nation of Haiti, and his work as a physician in Haiti's central plateau has drawn the attention of the international medical community for its stunning rate of success. But what most moved me on that evening in 2004 was his overwhelmingly contagious passion. In plain language, no small feat for a Harvard MD and Ph.D., he outlined the terrible suffering of many in our world **and** the incredible opportunities for service that makes a difference. On the yellow legal pad that I had brought with me to the lecture, I wrote these words: "Remember this. Do the thing that most enlivens you. Yield to the call."

We won't all move to Haiti and begin medical clinics to serve the people of an impoverished nation, but we can all follow the voice of vocation. We can hear the

call of God as it comes to us through the community of faith and the circumstances of our lives, and we can yield, surrender to that call.

Remember the wisdom of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." We can all pay attention. We can all choose surrender over resistance. We can all find that sweet spot where the two meet. I love to tell the stories of the ways in which you all are serving the world and enriching your own life. I love that on the second Sunday of each month our narthex is full of aluminum pans waiting to be filled with food for Common Ground's ministry to those living with HIV/AIDS. I love that you meet the needs of those in this community for hot meals, safe shelters, and warm clothing. I love that you respond to crises like the earthquake in Haiti with generosity and compassion. I love that you teach children and keep the nursery and clean the pews and bake casseroles and pray for one another. I love to tell the stories of how you have responded to the call, and I love to join you in pursuing our vocation in the world.

Mary Oliver closes her poem, "The Summer Day," with these lines:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

Who are you now? What irresistible call has laid hold of your life? Where do you hear the voice of God and the needs of the world calling you? In a letter to the congregation a few weeks ago, I quoted one of my favorite lines by my favorite poet, W.H. Auden, "you owe it to us all to get on with whatever you're good at."

In quiet moments of prayer and through the voice of this community, listen to your life. And then surrender to the good news that you have been claimed by God. Rejoice that your life does not belong to you alone, because this is the most revolutionary life-changing truth that our faith proclaims. God pursues you with plans for a future filled with hope. It's simply irresistible: you belong to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, New York: Harper and Row, 1956. p. 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953. chapter 19.

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<sup>iii</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. p. 15.

<sup>iv</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993. p. 119.