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Peace Lutheran Church
Holbrook, Arizona
4th Sunday after Epiphany
February 3, 2019

TEXT: Jeremiah 4: 1-10

At the end of this sermon I want my listeners to rejoice in that 1) God uses insignificant people like us to do His will and; 2) there is considerable freedom within God's will to make personal decisions.

His father was a drunk. His mother was an uneducated immigrant. After his parents' divorce and his mother could only find work babysitting, he knew poverty. He never saw the inside of a restaurant until as a teenager when he went on a church youth group trip. His clothes were hand-me-downs from his three older brothers. The German he first learned at home caused his classmates to laugh at him.

Today, however, my friend, Frank Wagner is a dynamic pastor of a congregation in West Palm Beach, Florida. Previously, he had been chosen by his denomination from a slade of impressive candidates to help start a mega-church in Southern California. He is a popular speaker at high school youth gatherings around the country. From his humble beginnings, Frank has become an influential, sought-after leader within the Christian Church.

Now, part of it may be because Frank is a good-looking guy. Someone in this room—I'm not going to say her name--once called Frank a "hunk." Funny story: Frank has a just-older brother who looks very much like him. This brother, not a believer, was a model and during Frank's seminary internship year, a picture of this brother made it to the cover of Playgirl magazine. Someone thought it would be funny to send a copy of this magazine to Frank's internship congregation in rural, conservative Texas. Oh the uproar!

I got to know Frank when we shared a room together overlooking a chicken coup in Appalachian Virginia. He and I were seminary classmates and were taking a Rural Ministry course. This involved a ten-day stay with "po' country folk" back in the hills. Perhaps the humble surroundings and simple meals reminded Frank of his upbringing, for the conversation switched got turned on when the lights got turned off. Laying under our hand-stitched quilts at night, I

listened as Frank told his story. Repeatedly, Frank would wonder—and question—God’s calling of him to be a pastor. Why would God choose someone like him with his poor and troubled background to serve in God’s Kingdom?

I hadn’t thought of Frank in years—frankly—but he came to mind when I read the verses of Jeremiah assigned as our Old Testament Lesson this morning. It’s the account of God’s call to Jeremiah to serve Him. God said to Jeremiah, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you...before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.*” (vs. 5) After that we sang these lyrics, “From my mother’s womb, you have chosen me,” didn’t we? And do you remember Jeremiah’s response, “*Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.*” We can imagine Jeremiah’s thoughts at this point: “Come on, Lord! Surely there must be some mistake. Haven’t you checked my resume? I’ve no experience with public relations. I’m hardly a “man of God.” I’m hardly a man, let alone a man of God! You’ve got a lot on Your mind, God; perhaps you’ve got Your wires crossed. Surely this call is for someone else.” Jeremiah’s amazement at his call to service is similar to my friend, Frank’s. “Who? Me, Lord? There must be some mistake. I’m a nobody. I’m not qualified. I’m unworthy.”

Do you ever feel like a nobody? Do you ever feel unqualified, not only for God’s service, but for life? Do you ever feel unworthy?

Sometimes we can feel that way as a church, too. We get to thinking that we’re of not much account as a congregation. We’re just little ‘ol Peace Lutheran, at the end of a dead-end, not even paved street. We don’t have a Sunday School. We don’t compare to those bigger, flashier congregations with all those programs and staff. Why the church up on the hill looks like a cathedral compared to our humble abode! Ain’t we taking on a bit much talking about a mission enhancement campaign, considering mission trips on the other side of the world, calling another full-time pastor when we’re barely holding things together as it is? Who do we think we are? Getting a little big-for-our-britches, wouldn’t you say?

We sometimes have an inferiority complex about our community, too, don’t we? Who’d want to live in Holbrook? We had our glory days but now, now...tsk, tsk, tsk. Kind of sad. And

with the power plant closing in a few years, all the worse. Doom and gloom. What possible good can come out of Holbrook?

I'm guessing these same kind of thoughts and questions have come out of people from...well, how about from the time of Jeremiah? "Lord, I can't do what you're telling me to do? I'm just a kid! I don't have my prophet credentials!" And how about before Jeremiah? There was another kid, barely a man—they called him David. What a punk! Least of his big, strapping, older brothers. His father thought him so unworthy of consideration when Samuel came around looking for a candidate for king that he didn't even call him in from the fields. And yet this kid, David, faced that scornful, armor-clad warrior giant of the Philistines, Goliath, and slew him—with only five smoother stones and a slingshot. See what God does with ordinary people!

And not just people, but ordinary places! We've just come through the Christmas season. We sang, "O Little Town Of _____." (Solicit response.) Yes, Bethlehem! The birthplace of our Savior. Was Bethlehem a great city? A renowned religious or cultural center? The mecca of the ancient world? I'll tell you, Holbrook has a lot more going for it than Bethlehem did. And yet God used Podunk Bethlehem so that we sing about it today. The prophet Micah wrote (5:2), "*But you, O Bethlehem of Judah, you who are least among the tribes of Judah, from you shall come forth One who shall lead my people, Israel.*"

That's how God is. Oh, He uses the mighty and powerful and rich and famous. He acts in big and important and Wall Street-ish and Hollywood-esque places at times. He certainly does. But just as often—and I'd venture to say—more often than not, he chooses insignificantly, poor, nobodies—like Jeremiah, like David—to carry out His will. He chooses backwoods, unglamorous places—like Bethlehem—to demonstrate His Kingdom. That's His usual MO.

One of my favorite verses in all of scripture—and oh, I have so many favorites!—is Luke 1:20. It's at the bottom of each of my emails. Know what it says? I'll start you out: "*For with God, nothing will be impossible.*" "*Ah, Lord God!*" Jeremiah will declare latter in his book, "*nothing is too difficult for Thee.*" (32:17) And as we'll sing in a bit, "Nothing! Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Nothing is too difficult for Thee!"

This morning, I want you to consider the possibility—no, the probability; no, that’s not even right: the certainly that God is calling you. To something. For something. I don’t know what it is God has in mind for you, _____, but it’s something. It may not be as a pastor, like my friend Frank—but maybe He is. God’s got something in store for you, too, Lisa. This isn’t a message just for young people—uh, younger people. No, God has something in mind for each of us. For you, _____, and for you, _____, and for you, _____. Unlike the Marines looking for “the few” and “the proud,” God is looking for “the many” and “the humble.” God is seeking out, calling out to all who are willing to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of His will.

But now I’d like to spend the last half of this sermon talking about God’s will. What I’m about to say may surprise some of you. Some within the Church may even call it heretical. Regardless, based on my study of the scriptures and my experience of life, it’s what I’ve come to believe—at least at this point in my spiritual journey (and God’s not done with me yet). Here’s what I’d like to say:

For most of us, God doesn’t have a specific plan. With some exceptions, I don’t believe God has a specific job, a certain spouse, x-number of children and a predestined life course. How can I say this when, just a moment ago, I said that God is most certainly calling each of us to some role, some function in His Kingdom? Let me explain.

(Project “God’s General Will” and “God’s Specific Will” on the wall. And continue…)

I think we can say without dispute that God desires certain things:

- 1. God desires salvation for every person everywhere.** John 3:17 says, *“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”* While God knows that there will be many who will reject the gift of salvation that’s offered, it is nonetheless His general will that all be saved.
- 2. God desires a satisfying life for us.** In John 10:10, Jesus says, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* Jeremiah 29:11: says, *“For I know the plans I*

have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you; plans to give you a future and a hope.” God wants us to live full, satisfying, purposeful lives—but not necessarily easy—lives.

- 3. God desires peace, justice and love to prevail among all people.** Micah 6:8 asks, “*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.*” When asked what was the greatest of the commandments (we talked about this last night at Mission chapel, remember?), what did Jesus say? “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength..and love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Mt. 22:37-39) It is God’s general will that peace, love justice and goodwill exist among people. We even heard in our Epistle Lesson this morning that the greatest of all the spiritual gifts is love!

No doubt there are more things we could list under God’s General Will but I want to move on to talk about God’s Specific Will. (Move forward with the slides.)

This is where the rubber hits the road. Does God want you to be a teacher or a civil engineer? Has God marked Tara Rodriguez to be your wife or Preston Stuart to be your husband? Are you to move to Albuquerque, sell your horses, take a job in Phoenix, sign up for classes at NPC or take a vacation in Hawaii? Does God have a Superbowl pick?

This is where I say, with exceptions, God doesn’t have a pre-determined plan. It’s up to us. He gives us freedom within parameters.

Notice, I didn’t say, “God doesn’t care” or “It doesn’t matter to God.” God does care about the choices we make and it does matter to Him what we do—just as it matters to a loving parent the choices the child makes—but I believe God gives us an awful lot of latitude to work out the specifics, as long as those specifics stay within His general will.

Let me be quick to point out that in some cases, I believe God has specific plans. Take Jeremiah. God had a specific plan for him, to be a prophet of God. Take Mary. He chose her to be the mother of not just any child, but of Jesus. Take Paul. God marked him specifically to be a

missionary and help establish the early Church. I believe God still calls certain people to particular tasks today. Little Sarah Burgess—age, what? Seven year old?—believes God is calling her to be a missionary in Thailand when she grows up—and maybe He is!

Yet, for most of us, I think there's considerable freedom to choose the work we want, whether or not we marry and if so, to whom, the number of children we may have, where we choose to live and what Superbowl team to root for. Does God have a specific pastor in mind for us here at Peace? Maybe. But maybe also there are any number of suitable candidates who could do the job well.

God gives us a tremendous amount of freedom—and sometimes we hang ourselves with all that freedom but nonetheless, freedom within parameters is a good thing. It's God's thing. We don't have to play detective and ferret out every little thing that comes down-the-pike, searching to determine if God would have us do this or do that. This gives us freedom to explore various career options, check out all kinds of possible mates, consider all kinds of places to travel to on vacation, even changing course mid-life. Isn't that great? I think that's good news!

There's another bit of good news in all this for us, and that takes us back to my friend, Frank. I said earlier that Frank used to wonder—and stand in awe—that God had found a place for him in the Kingdom. Given his background and abilities—and I didn't tell you but Frank really struggled academically; studies weren't a natural for him—Frank marveled that God had called him to service in the Church. And yet, God did just that. God called and welcomed Frank as a worker in the Kingdom. God had a place for Frank.

And God had a place for teenaged, wet-behind-the-ears, inexperienced, ineloquent Jeremiah.

And God has a place for you. For you, _____ and for you, _____, and for you, _____. Each of us a precious, gifted and loved child of God—and that has nothing to do with how we may feel about ourselves—and each of us is called by God to do something, something good, something positive, something contributing to God's service within God's Kingdom. Just what form your service will take—in most cases—is up to you to determine, for

God has given most of us plenty of latitude. The amazing and humbling thing, the good news today is that God can and does use unlikely, insignificant, plain ol' sinners like you and me to be His hands and feet, voice and heart in this world. There is a place, there is room, there is work for each of us in God's family.

"Ah, Lord God!" Jeremiah said in trepidation of his calling. *"Ah, Lord God!"* we also can say—say in thankful expectancy of how He may use us for His glorious purposes, living within His general will and giving us the freedom to work out the specifics. Amen.

Songs:

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| Opening | "Son Of God, Eternal Savior" (ELW#655) |
| After O.T. & in Lieu of Psalm 71 | "No Longer Slaves" (Worship Team) |
| Sermon | "Ah, Lord God" |
| Communion | YouTube videos: "You Raise Me Up" and "Who Am I?" |
| Closing | "How Firm A Foundation" (ELW#796) |