

“Known & Loved” by Rev. Ridgley Joyner
Preached February 3, 2019
Jeremiah 1:4-10

I regret to admit that the first time I ever saw any of the Harry Potter movies was at the Mann Center two summers ago. I took Will because he LOVES to read Harry Potter and an outside movie seemed like the perfect date night for us. What I have learned since from the kids is that the movies do not count, and that I must read the books too. After that first movie, I was hooked and we had to watch every movie, I had to know the entire narrative. I’m now one step closer to being a Harry Potter Enthusiast, although I’ve been informed I have that I’m not good enough.

I am surprised how this series is so timeless. I mean, Harry Potter was all the rage when I was in high school, 7,000 years ago.

If you aren’t familiar with this cultural phenomenon, let me fill you in. The story begins with a young boy named Harry in England who lives with his aunt Petunia, uncle Vernon and cousin Dudley because his parents have died. He is an orphaned misunderstood teenager living in the home of “muggles” (people who do not possess magic). The story leads us to immediately root for him as his “family” is rude, boisterous, they resent Harry and simply have him due to obligation. In fact, they are so mean to him that they have him live in a broom closet under that stairs, even though cousin Dudley has two rooms, one for him and one for his stuff.

Strange things begin to happen to the household and a letter keeps coming in the mail from a place called Hogwarts for Harry. Harry’s Uncle knows just what it is as he believes that this is the very thing that led to the death of his sister-in-law, along with her marrying a wizard. Harry simply cannot is not allowed to follow in his parent’s footsteps. But we come to learn that Harry is a celebrity in the wizarding world. And these letters from Hogwarts do not cease as it is his destiny to go to Hogwarts to study magic, to become a wizard himself and defeat the evil wizard Lord Voldemort.

Some strange magic things happen that are beyond Harry’s control, but are really quite funny, like his cousin getting a pig tail. More and more and more letters

keep appearing at the home, some are being addressed to the “broom closet under the stairs”. No how many letters Uncle Vernon hid, they just kept coming, some even two a day- to the point of being uncontrollable. The uncle gets exasperated and decides to move his family moving to a remote island where these letters cannot seek Harry out. Harry must be contained. He must be kept from what the wizarding world is calling him to be.

Suddenly, Hagrid from Hogwarts takes it into his own hands to pick up Harry and deliver him to get him ready for school, to learn how to be a wizard—the very thing he was made to be.

Not only is Hollywood full of stories where a youth goes on a journey to realize his full potential—but scripture too is full of stories where young people are called by God.

In this season after the epiphany of the Lord, we are reminded that, yes, God appears to us in Jesus, but also to us, simple ordinary people to do extraordinary things for God, even in the midst of fear, doubt, anxiety--God calls us to participate in the mission of God.

So today we read of yet another epiphany, a young boy of promise, who was known from the beginning by God, whose call was in the works before he could even talk.

It is the year 627 BCE in the Reign of Josiah, the 5th month of Israelite captivity and Jerusalem has been under foreign control. God’s holy city, no longer in possession of God’s people. Here we are introduced to a young man Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah.

The book first begins with God appearing in an epiphany and announcing to Jeremiah:

“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”

Now this is a lot—God is saying: I made you, I know you, I’ve known you even before you knew yourself, but also I’ve consecrated you. I’ve got a place and a

plan for you and it's time, you're going to do something big—you are going to be my prophet to the nations.

Naturally, Jeremiah responds with an excuse like we all do—one of his age—God, I am only a boy, I cannot speak for you—

God immediately rebukes him, telling him to give himself credit, stop putting himself down.

Do not say that, for you will go where I send you, and you will speak what I need you to say—

Jeremiah's response, his excuse, it's based out of his fear and doubt of his ability to fulfill the call of God—he is young, he doesn't know what he feels like he needs to know—

what if people don't listen?

What if they think I'm too young?

Won't I need years of wisdom to have authority to speak to others who are older than me? How can I *ensure* they will listen?

God, I can't speak, this is scary. I'm not equipped, I'm not ready.

Do not be afraid of them, God says, I am with you. I will give you my words. I will equip you ...

To pluck up

To pull down

To destroy

To throw down,

To build

To Plant.

God has big plans for Jeremiah, these verbs are so destructive, giving the sense of death and new life. That which is here must come down, and be built again. No easy task, especially for such a young boy. But God ensures presence and the words when they're most needed.

All that is required is for Jeremiah to leap. To believe in himself the way God believes in him and to not fear the people he is being called to prophesy to—

The Israelites once considered themselves untouchable to foreign enemies because they were God's people— are now within captivity, they have been defeated—

They may not be the most receptive crowd.

But God says, I am with you. I have put my words in your mouth. Do not be afraid of them.

God calls us wherever, whenever, however. God gives us what we need. Even despite our meager excuses. And God calls God's people of all ages. This winter, it has been even more evident to me—how much we can learn from one another, especially our young people, their leadership and their love for one another.

The day after Oliver died, I started getting texts from our youth. They were learning the news and they wanted to be together. I followed their lead and scheduled a time together after school in their youth room. I drove to the school and they all piled in my car. The car was silent, but it was like we all had returned to one another.

Life is crazy for teenagers, we know that. Especially that of our high schoolers and college students. Some of them they all hadn't been at the same place at the same time in a while, but after school, they flocked to the church. They flocked to one another.

They knew just where to go in their time of need. To be in the place that knew them before they knew themselves. We all piled into the youth room 6th grade to juniors in college, immediately embracing their Sunday school teachers, their youth advisors, one another. They squeezed on the couches, grabbed some pizza and sighed.

That moment was what they wanted it to be. So after those sighs, the stories began. They began sharing story after story of Oliver's impact on their life, but also those moments they had with him that simply brought a smile to their face and a tear to their eye.

One of the things that was important to Oliver was his church, so his church... they came, they laughed, they cried, they grieved together. They celebrated their brother's life together for two hours.

But that wasn't enough, even after that a youth just needed to be with his church more the next afternoon. It led to an epiphany, an idea, a way to do something to help. He decided he wanted to make more of these "Team Oliver" bracelets. We decided to make bracelets together for his loved ones at his Celebration of life service. Parts were ordered, items picked up and after the youth laid their brother to rest on Thursday they came to the church once more, telling stories, laughing reminiscing on what Oliver would be doing if he was with them then. Kids and parents. All there together, working together, loving together---being the church. They spent the evening hammering, tying, laughing, catching up.

The next day, kids piled in cars oncemore, this time more joined. They made primary colored shirts that said "Team Oliver, St Johns Devon Youth" to wear together to the Celebration of Life. We were and are as proud as ever to be his family.

Merely a week later, these kids, they all showed up to the MLK day of service at the church. This event was something Oliver wanted to happen, he helped plan it, and then those that loved him, carried it on—the scouts brought it together to make it his Eagle Scout Project so that he could get awarded his Eagle Scout. They provided food, and beverages, logistics, and clean up. Cindy Kerr and Ellen Moeller and the case for smiles team at St. John's gathered together, donated sewing machines and help for the day of—after much planning, on one of the coldest days off of work and school, people gathered in this space—the youth

group, Conestoga students, Paoli Troop 181, and some awesome ladies at St. John's who coordinated it all. We gathered for hours, singing, dancing, sewing, learning from one another, with one shared bond the love of God we knew in our brother Oliver.

I was so humbled to see Nancy Davis helping Connor sew a pillowcase, Pam Schaffer ironing with Andrew Ealer-- Barbara McConnell showing Luke how to roll the case like a hot dog and pin, to see people come from all over the community to serve and bring joy to the community. A dream of one, brought into fruition by all. This was the embodiment of what God wants for us.

Everyone together, we made around 500+ pillowcases to give to kids in the hospital through case for smiles. If it weren't for the people who donated, Connor who shopped, Oliver who picked patterns, the scouts who worked, cindy who herded the cats and provided so much infrastructure and Oliver's family who led...this beautiful thing- the love of God wouldn't have been shared.

It's then I was reminded. That day looking at the cars lined in the field out front, and the adults holding the fabric for kids to pin—that we are not only called by God to do the work of God but that we are also called to each other—we are called out of a community to a community.

Oliver's dream brought all our gifts together. God calls us to each other so that we might mutually learn from one another no matter old or how young—to seek to embody as a people the love of God that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

Paul was writing to a community of people who were considering themselves better than one another based on their gifts—and he was trying to show them that they all were called by God to each other—these words about love are often associated with weddings, but Paul is providing a framework for their life together.

Remember when I said that Harry Potter was a celebrity in the wizarding world? Well, the very power that made Harry so special was the love his mother had for him—LOVE was the very thing that gave him the ability to fulfill his destiny.

Now more than ever is the love of God evident in the things I am learning from our young people as they courageously live their call as disciples.

And how we embody this love--- This agape/unconditional/ “I will walk with you through the worst part of your life and celebrate with you in the joyous days of your life” kind of love—it starts at this table—

where God himself gave the gift of his presence, the gift of nourishment, the gift of bread for the journey. We come to this table, remembering the sacrificial love of God in Jesus, but also evident to us in every day stories as simple as Harry Potter. God invites us to this table to feast *together* so that we might know *who* we are, and *whose* we are.

People whom God formed in the womb, who knew us before we even knew ourselves, and who calls us to each other so we might embody God’s love for the world—

Love that is patient, love that is kind. Love that does not envy, does not boast, that is not proud. That doesn’t dishonor others, or is self-seeking, Love that is not easily angered, or it keeps record of wrongs. ⁷ Love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Come taste and see that God’s love never fails.