

The Gift of Change
Jeremiah 1:4-10
By Ridgley Joyner

We began 2022 following the magi as they sought out the Christ child to pay homage on what we celebrate in the church as the feast of the Epiphany. The Sunday after the Epiphany we read the account of Christ's baptism 30 years later and remembered our own baptisms, reminding us that we are known and claimed by a merciful God.

In the weeks following we began our sermon series on the gifts of faith. Working through the lectionary texts each week, we will be focusing on gift giving—but with a twist. In these weeks leading up to Lent, we will be reflecting on the gifts of our faith—some we love, some we'd never thought we'd need, and some that are just plain challenging. Christ came for all that Christmas night, and in doing so began the ever widening of God's circle of grace. God bestows upon us gifts of faith to help us in our journey.

We began the series reading Paul's letter to the Corinthians exploring the gift of community, how community and relationships can be a gift to us and our faith. Last week we read a passage in Nehemiah that helped us think about the gift of scripture. God's people came back to Jerusalem after the exile and commemorated the rebuilding of the wall and temple by reading the Torah. We reflected upon the gift of scripture in our own lives, the Bible as we know it today, and how that it is a gift for our faith because we not only turn to it for words of comfort from God, but also words that provoke us. By sitting with challenging texts or sitting with the texts in challenging times, God's spirit may inspire us to be a faithful people.

Today we are invited into the call of Jeremiah, our scripture reading gives us a glimpse of a conversation between God and Jeremiah. This first part of chapter one is known as the "Call narrative" of Jeremiah and has similarities to that of Moses, Elijah, and other prophets.

God comes to Jeremiah, reminding him that he was knit in the womb, that God knew him before he even knew the world. God had a plan for Jeremiah—God has chosen him to be a prophet to the nations. But he, like Moses, immediately expresses doubt-- "I am only a boy" God's response to Jeremiah's doubt is key here. For being known and loved by God is the very foundation for his call, even though he doubts himself. God gives Jeremiah 2 things: I will be with you, and I will give you what you need. Jeremiah's qualifications to serve God are not rooted in his expert training and background, but in his identity as God's own.

Jeremiah was invited to be an instrument of God's message—the prophecy that things were going to change for God's people, they would no longer remain the same, they couldn't. That things were going to change whether they liked it or not. God uses a series of verbs in verse 10 to reflect the nature of the work that God will do through his call. Pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant—far from comfort inducing verbs. I'm very struck by the first couple verbs being destructive verbs. We can't help but think bad things are to come with these words.

For the people of God, the plucking up and pulling down was uncomfortable for them too. But it is through disruptive change that God is truly able to do the the work of rebuilding, planting. It is through destruction that God is able to work resurrection that God is able to bring about the beauty of a new thing.

Jeremiah was a young man known and loved by God—and called to be a part of God’s work of rebuilding through destruction. Jeremiah’s commission as to share with God’s people the gift of change.

The past couple of weeks our affirmation of faith has looked different each Sunday—we have affirmed our faith using a part of our constitution called the book of confessions. Each confession has included aspects of the week’s theme. You may have found that our affirmations of faith are not as well known to you this month because we can’t possible say a whole confession for our affirmation of faith. In 1985, the PCUSA commissioned a group of people at General Assembly to create a BRIEF confession of faith, and it is one of our shortest—it is a page long.

The book of confessions is my favorite part of our constitution because it reminds us of the gift of change. What is held in the pages among the many words is a backstory. Each confession was written during a time called “statis confessionis” – a time when *The State of the World, in Which the Church Must Stand by Her Confession*. Meaning that we the church have found ourselves in periods in our history that we have had to stand up and proclaim what it means to believe in God, to be the church at that point in time, and often those times, are times of great change. Times of plucking up and tearing down, destruction. Each confession was a response to the *change* that was coming about at that point in time. And even today these confessions speak to us about God, the church, the spirit, Jesus the sacraments, you name it.

Held within these pages of our constitution, we have the theological declaration of Barmen out of Germany that was created by the German Christian Church during Hitler’s reign when the state was pushing the church to align with its political views and endorse the Nazi party as the “Christian party”. We have the Confession of 1967 out of America that sought to reconcile our faith with all that was happening in the 60s. Most recently, the confession of Belhar out of South Africa that spoke against apartheid and racism in the church and in our world.

Each of these times of change---were times when the people of God were experiencing a breakdown of what once brought comfort and stability---a plucking up, destroying...and God’s people were appointed to proclaim that God would plant a new understanding of our faith and life and bring a renewed church into being.

Today is a special day in the life of our church—the annual congregational meeting. I must admit before I came to St. John’s I had never experienced an annual meeting with such detail and magnitude of this church family. Never had I been invited into such a process. Up until then

it was “ok what do we HAVE to do and how can we do it as quickly as possible” as if it was checking off a yearly to do list.

But, when I came to St. John’s and experienced the Annual Meeting—it wasn’t just something we *had* to do. It was this beautiful celebration and a communal sharing of where God was at work each and every day of the year—all 365 days. Today we will be approving a nominations slate for those who have responded to God’s call to a particular office of deacon, elder and trustee—to use the gifts God has given them to serve in this way.

But what I see in this report is that each and every member of this congregation is like Jeremiah—known and loved by God—and *called* by God for such a time as this. 2020 brought on so much change—change of leadership in our country, change of how and where and when we work, how our children go to school. Even the simplest of things suddenly became challenging. We couldn’t just go to the grocery. We had to wear masks, and sanitize and navigate shortages, some of us learned the “curbside” way of grocery shopping. It seemed like there wasn’t one thing that stayed the same in 2020. And I think we knew some of these things would be here to stay, but perhaps we didn’t expect so many to remain. Because here we are—worshipping virtually during a COVID surge and prepping for another virtual Annual Meeting.

2021 has brought change to our congregation in more than just the pandemic. While navigating hybrid life we have found ourselves tired of change, feeling burnout, and weary. The pandemic did not stop job loss, losing a family member, cancer, depression, life changing diagnoses, family changes. WE have learned in 2021 that change is the constant.

But what we celebrate today is that while change is constant, God is steadfast. In the face of change, we are invited to remember that God knit us in the womb, God calls us, God is with us, and God gives us what we need. One of the things that has been striking to me this week was to read our annual report and see what the gift of change did for us. Yes, it halted many beloved traditions and ministries that we look forward to resuming. But change was a gift because it helped us re-think why we do what do, what makes it important and seek to prioritize God in our work, even if it wasn’t what we were always used to.

The biggest gift I have seen from all this change is a commitment to the community—how can we welcome new members in our midst, how can we continue to check in with one another? How can we welcome old friends back into the fold through technology like livestream worship? I’ve seen this church navigate a manse sale, caring for their pastors, livestreaming worship, learning virtually for Supper at St. Johns, dancing in the parking lot, hiking in God’s creation. We have enabled so many more ways for participation in mission from near and far. It may have felt more like plucking up and less like planting, but God is doing a new thing through resurrecting our church.

I hope you are able to see the same this morning; I hope you are able to hear these words to Jeremiah as God’s words to you for 2022 as we embrace another year serving God with one another. That God will be with us and God will give us what we need to do what we are called

to do. Because while so much continues to change, God remains the same. May we know that each and every change will be a gift. It will not be the same as 2019, 2020, or even 2021. God remains steadfast throughout all this change because it is God who knit us in the womb, knows us by name and sends us to be the light of God to the world. It is God who plucks up, but it is also God who plants. Our God is a God of resurrection. Our God is a God who dwells in the change and shows us that in the midst of change, new things come to life. Thanks be to God.

Let us give thanks to God by bringing our gifts to God so that we might begin the process of building and planting God's kingdom here on earth, now. Please join me in our doxology.