

“WHAT IS IT YOU PLAN TO DO...?”

Jeremiah 1:4-8; Matthew 6:19-33

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Probably most of us have not heard, as Jeremiah did, a loud and clear call from God to become a prophet or undertake some similar, specific mission. Nevertheless, there's something about the beginning of Jeremiah's story that really resonates. There is this thing that needs doing, that he is meant to do... and what does he say? “Oh, no, not me. I'm too young. I'm not ready for that yet.” This feels familiar, doesn't it? At least, it does to me, because I know I can – and have – come up with plenty of reasons why I can't do something that I probably should be doing. The specific reasons might be different, maybe “I'm too old” instead of “I'm too young,” or maybe “that's not my gift.” But I get where Jeremiah is coming from, and probably you do too.

It's evidently such a common human reaction that it's a feature of several Biblical “call” stories. When God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and tells him to go and lead his people out of slavery, Moses says, “I'm no good at public speaking.” When the prophet Isaiah finds himself in God's presence, he says (more or less) “I am unworthy, and so are all my people.” When God tries to give Jonah a mission, Jonah doesn't say anything; he just gets up and tries to put as much distance as possible between himself and the task he's been asked to do.

As I think about what might be behind this instinct to shy away from a calling or a nudge or an opportunity, I wonder: Is it fear? Or just laziness, and an unwillingness to give up any time or comforts? Do we doubt the quiet voice that urges us to listen and take action? Or is the siren call of other more “productive” or enjoyable options too strong? Is it that we lack confidence and tend to devalue our own abilities? Or that we feel hopeless about the possibility that one person's actions will make any kind of difference?

Maybe it's all of that.

Maybe some or all of those factors derail even our good intentions, as with the Apostle Paul when he admits “I don't do the good things I want to do, but instead I do the wrong things I don't want to do,” (Romans 7) in another bit of scriptural honesty that feels only too familiar.

It seems to me – and perhaps this is particularly true of our culture and our time, I don't know – that we simply don't take ourselves seriously as moral agents whose words and actions and commitments *matter*. Oh, I know there are some people who *do* take themselves much *TOO* seriously as arbiters of the beliefs and behaviors of others, and but that will-to-power-over-others is not what I'm talking about here. I'm also not talking about grandiose and self-serving illusions of “saving the world.” I'm thinking about how we locate ourselves within a community

and tradition of faith, and claim an identity as children of God... yet often relinquish any sense of ourselves as individuals with responsibility, gifts, or power.

We've internalized the messages of a culture that views us as mere consumers to be manipulated and marketed to. We're regarded as part of a "demographic" while also being told that our individual rights are more important than the common good. We face a paralyzing array of choices about some things and feel we have no choice at all about others. We feel the onslaught of changes which we may welcome or hate but are powerless to resist.

But the witness of scripture resists an acceptance of powerlessness.

Jesus (quoting the writer of Deuteronomy) tells us that we have hearts, souls, minds, and strength with which to love God *and* our neighbors.

Jeremiah's story reminds us that we are known by God, and beloved of God. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we have gifts to offer, that we are messengers of Christ's love, and that the help and encouragement of God's Spirit is always at hand.

If we believe that God speaks to us through the scriptures, then we have to say that GOD believes that we *are* moral agents, whose actions, words, and commitments have power.

If we push away the messages of fear, apathy, individualism, helplessness... in fact, our world is full of evidence that this is true.

I heard a radio piece the other day about a project that tracks hate crimes in our country. Hate crimes – acts of violence targeting people because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. – have gone up significantly in the past few years. 22 per cent just last year in our 10 largest cities. The researchers track these events and look for trends - for spikes and declines. A disturbing but important thing they notice is that hate crimes against a particular group of people tend to spike when a public figure such as a politician or entertainer says negative things about that group, or when social media posts attack them. What I found really interesting though, is something else the interviewee said: that after 9-11, when President Bush spoke about respect for Muslim Americans, the number of hate crimes toward Muslims *dropped sharply* the very next day and by two-thirds over the following year. None of us have a sphere of influence that large, but the power of words to influence for good or evil is sobering.

It seems to bear out something conservationist Jane Goodall said: "You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."

I learned recently that the risk of suicide for young people who identify as trans or non-gender-conforming is shockingly high – over half seriously consider ending their lives and many attempt or succeed in doing so. But I also learned that the risk is lower *by more than 30 per cent* if a

young trans person has even ONE accepting adult in their life. Just one. A whole community of acceptable is even better, of course, but *even one* makes that big a difference.

I don't know what particular kind of difference you're supposed to be making in the world, with your life, at this moment in time. Maybe it's a life-long calling; maybe there's a place just now where your gift for quiet presence or bold witness or creating beauty or... whatever... can shine a light for a little while.

I do know that being intentional will make that light shine brighter.

Many of you will know that I took the title of today's sermon from a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Summer Day." That poem ends with the question,

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

I love that line because it speaks to the intentionality that life ought to call forth from us, but sometimes doesn't. It's simply a fact that we all have only so much time in this life. And yet we have so many ways to fritter it away on things that don't matter, don't bring us joy, don't add to the goodness in the world.

Mary Oliver's poetic question sounds like - and is sometimes quoted as if - it's the voice of a life-coach urging us to get with the program and make some goals and get on with accomplishing great things. But that's very far from the poem's point. What it actually describes is an experience of looking closely at a grasshopper and wandering through fields. Oliver writes,

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 down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed....

This is a far cry from what we usually mean when we talk about plans for our lives, what we're going to do, how we ought to be making a difference, using our time well, and so forth. But I find it a powerful and necessary reminder that our purposes as children of God don't begin in busyness but in wonder and gratitude, in human *being*, not doing. Rest, prayer, attentiveness... these help us to sort out what matters from what doesn't. They help us understand, not so much what we want to *do*, but what kind of people we want to be.

Attention and intention are woven together, I think. When we choose to pay attention, we begin to see differently and understand more. Our love and compassion expand. We know ourselves better, too. We find our place, claim our gifts and our voice. We remember what's important. We become more intentional with our days and therefore with our lives. We become, perhaps, able to live lives that make a difference in some way in the world.

What is it you plan to do with *your* one wild and precious life?

As Christians, of course, this question brings up the idea of *calling*. Our most basic understanding of who we are is that Jesus has called us to follow him and that we are trying to do that in ways large and small. But beyond that, we might also consider: Is there something more specific God is calling me to right now? Am I listening? Is the Spirit nudging me in a new direction?

It might be clear. Or it might not be... so there are other ways you might come at it. Here are a few to think about.

Consider your gifts: what do you have that you can offer to God, to the world, to your community, to someone in your life you could help or lift up? Maybe you can take a leadership role in a ministry of the church. Maybe you can be a friend. Maybe you can be the person who speaks in ways that lead others away from hate. Maybe you are a peacemaker, a teacher, an encourager. Maybe it's time to let your creativity blossom.

Consider your passion: what fills you with joy and energy? what needs or injustices in the world tug at your heart? what do you love to talk about and share with others?

Consider your questions: what are you always wanting to know more about? what new ideas and learnings have excited you and awakened your mind? where do you feel a gap, or a confusion, or a troublesome bundle of questions nagging at you?

Consider what you might pay more attention to in your life: where and when do you need to go more slowly so you can notice signs of God's presence? who do you need to listen more closely to? do you need to quiet your thoughts, put aside the to-do list, practice waiting ... so you can hear the Spirit's whisper or the longings of your own heart?

Do you know how to pay attention? To kneel down? To see what really matters?

"Look at the birds," Jesus says, "consider the lilies." See how they are exactly themselves, never trying to be anything else, and how their existence gives praise to God. Learn from them about the goodness and beauty and generosity of God. Pay attention, and you'll be called back into trust and away from anxious striving and needless worry and wasting your life on things unworthy of your energy. Understand that you are valuable, beloved, needed, powerful, capable of being a blessing and making a difference. Make it your intention to let God's love shape your life in the world. Amen.