



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Who? Why? Where?

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Darden K. Caylor, a pastor in Cedar Rapids, IA, says that the day he decided to become a minister is still clearly etched in his brain. He was sitting at his Grandma Rula's house when he heard a voice speak to him from a distance. At first it was muffled, but then it became clearer. It said, "You should become a minister." Caylor couldn't believe it. Was this divine intervention? Was God really speaking to him? Did God really want him to become a minister? He was so shocked he couldn't move. The voice spoke again. This time, however, he was somewhat confused by what it said. This time the voice said, "If you build it, they will come." It was then that he opened his eyes and saw Grandma Rula standing over him, she was saying, "You should become a minister." It seems he had fallen asleep watching the movie *Field of Dreams*. In his sleepy, muddled mind, the movie's message and Grandma Rula's message had become intertwined.

God came to a young man named Jeremiah and called him to be a prophet. Jeremiah probably wished it was his Grandma Rula extending the invitation, rather than God. The life of a prophet was a difficult and even dangerous one. Jeremiah would not be a popular messenger. But this was God speaking to Jeremiah, not Grandma Rula. God told Jeremiah that God had known him and had planned his calling even before Jeremiah was born. This was not a call to be taken lightly.

Not surprisingly, Jeremiah did what most prophets of God before him had done. Jeremiah protested, saying that he was not a very good speaker. He pointed out his age and inexperience. But the Lord promised to be with Jeremiah and told him not to be afraid. God touched Jeremiah's mouth and gave him words to speak. And speak them Jeremiah did. He became one of God's most eloquent spokespersons.

This is one of the most familiar and most powerful stories in Scripture. Because in the story of the call of Jeremiah, we find the answer to three of life's most pressing questions: Who am I? Why am I here? And where does my power come from?



Let's begin with WHO AM I?

An Associated Press report from Ocean Springs, Mississippi sometime back, told about a man whose last name is Unknown. This is going to sound like the old Abbot and Costello routine, "Who's on First." But this guy's last name really is Unknown. What's his name? Unknown. His full name is Nikone Unknown. Unknown is 40-years-old and he owns a restaurant in Ocean Springs. Unknown acquired that name when he immigrated to the United States from Laos in 1979. Unknown feared revealing his real name to immigration officials, who simply listed his last name as "unknown." Unknown's wife is Ratchanee Unknown, and his son is Nick Unknown.

This world is filled with people who think they are unknown.



An American couple founded a business in Portobelo, Panama. Then they wrote a book to publicize interest in their adopted home. On its dedication page this book tells us that in the olden days ships sailing to and from the Indies carried a passenger list with the names written down according to the social pecking order: Royalty and Crown officials at the top, acknowledging their status ... down through the list until, at the very bottom, all lumped together, are the names of the persons and the notation: "Persons of no importance."

There are a lot of people who feel that's where their names would be listed in the grand scheme of things. "Persons of no importance." Name Unknown.



Author, Karen Burton Mays, says that once when one of their children was small and had been misbehaving, he found himself at the end of a stern parental lecture. "What are we going to do?" asked the Karen. In self-resignation her young son suggested, "Why don't we jes' frow me ina garbage." "That," says Karen Mays, "has become the signature statement for any time when a family member is frustrated: 'Jes frow me ina garbage, I guess.'"

This is where many people see themselves. "Persons of no importance." Name Unknown. "Jes frow me ina garbage, I guess." No value, no potential, no purpose.

But who does God say we are? "Even before you were born I knew you..." God says to Jeremiah.



The great clergyman Harry Emerson Fosdick once dealt with this question of who you and I are in God's eyes. His argument is compelling and affirming. Listen to what Fosdick has to say:

The more we know about any subject, the less we think in terms of the general and the more we think in terms of the specific. For example, let's suppose my car breaks down. I open the hood and I stare at a mass of wires, rubber and metal, none of which mean anything to me. I don't know anything about cars, so when I look under the hood, it is all one big blob. But a trained mechanic will look under the hood of my car and he or she will not see a blob or a mass. The mechanic will see the carburetor and the fuel pump, and he will reach into a part of the motor that I do not even see and tighten a connecting wire. You see, the more you know about cars, the less you think in terms of the blob, the mass, and the more you think about individual parts.

Let's use another analogy. Let's imagine an illiterate person walks into a public library. What does he see in that library? A mass of books ... walls and walls of books. They don't mean anything to him. They are just books. To the librarian, though, each book has its author and title and catalogue number. And a favorite book can produce hours and hours of pleasurable reading and even more pleasurable conversation. The more you know about books, the less you think in terms of books in general and the more you think about individual volumes. The more we know about any subject, the less we think in terms of the general and the more we think in terms of the specific!

Now, think of God. Recent statistics tell us that by the end of 2011 there will be over 7 billion of us living on this planet ... that's 7 billion of God's children on this planet! That's a lot. When God looks at humanity, does God see a faceless blob? Of course not. God, who is the Source of all knowledge, does not see the general. God sees the specific. God knows you and me more intimately than we know ourselves. We are not unknowns. We are not persons of no importance. We are not garbage to be thrown out. We are God's children. For as I've declared to you numerous times: Each of us ... Each of us ... has a spark of the Divine right here – in our hearts. The Spirit of the Living God ... the Holy Spirit!



That's the answer to our first question, *Who am I?*
Now for the second, WHY AM I HERE?

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet. He was given a two-sided task: to destroy and to build up. That kind of message was guaranteed to make him very unpopular. Fortunately, or unfortunately as the case may be, God doesn't call many people to be prophets. However, all of us are called to serve God in some way. And until we find what that calling is and fulfill it, you and I will never be truly happy.

John W. Gardner, founding chairman of Common Cause [a nationwide, independent, non-partisan organization "for those Americans who want to help in the rebuilding of the nation."] Gardner tells of a cheerful old man who would always ask the same question to every new person he met: "What have you done," he would ask, "that you believe in and you are proud of?" He never asked conventional questions such as "What do you do for a living?" It was always, "What have you done that you believe in and you are proud of?"

It's kind of an unsettling question, don't you think? It's not that the old man was some fierce interrogator ... no, he just enjoyed making people think. The old man was delighted by a woman who answered, "I'm doing a good job raising three children," and by a cabinetmaker who said, "I believe in good workmanship and practice it," and by another woman who said, "I started a bookstore and it's the best bookstore for miles around."

When asked why he did it, this was his reply: "I don't really care how they answer. I just want to put the thought into their minds. They should live their lives in such a way that they can have a good answer. Not a good answer for me, but for themselves. That's what's important."

Now, you and I would say they need a good answer not just for themselves, but for God. "What have you done that you believe in and you are proud of?" It's a great question. Jeremiah knew why he was here. God had spoken to him and had given him a mission.

What is your mission?

Successful businesses today all have mission statements. Could you write out your own personal mission statement? You'll never be happy until you find something important that you can give your life to ... regardless of your age! Did you hear that, all you kids sitting in the sanctuary today? Did you hear that, all you oldsters sitting in the sanctuary today? You'll never be happy until you find something important to which you can give your life.....



*And that brings us to our third question: WHERE DOES MY POWER COME FROM?
Where do I find the energy and the endurance to respond to God's call?*

There was no question where Jeremiah's power came from. First, God supplied Jeremiah with an identity, then God charged him with a job to do. When Jeremiah protested, God told him not to be afraid, then touched his life in such a way that he was able to do the job.

When God calls, God also supplies the ability ... we New Testament followers of the way know that ability comes from the indwelling Spirit. God's calling doesn't rely on our talents, it relies on our obedience. What if Jeremiah had said no? What if I had said no? Wow ... I would have missed out on so much! The people, the places, the challenges, the love. What if you say NO? Think about it; Jeremiah's story is similar to the stories of Abraham, Gideon, Esther, Moses, David, Paul. In each case God chose the most unlikely of persons, in spite of their status, background and education, to do the work ... and each time God equipped them for the task. God can use you the same way.

There's an old joke about a man who was asked if he could play a violin. He answered, "I don't know. I've never tried." That's actually a very wise answer. How do we know what we can or can't do until we try?

Dr. Abraham Maslow, the noted psychologist, has estimated that the average human being achieves only 7 percent of their potential. Should any of us be content with that kind of slim percentage of success? Well, where do we get our power?

The Holy Spirit is there for us and we tap into that power when we align our lives with God's purposes.



Maurice Berquist in her book, *The Miracle and Power of Blessing*, speaks of what she calls the parallel principle. She says that if you pull a copper wire parallel to overhead power lines ... you get

a transfer of power. Even though the second wire is not physically touching the first or connected in any way to a generator ... power will come into it just as soon as it gets parallel.

When our lives are parallel to God's purposes, we find a power we never dreamed possible. And it makes no difference who we are.

God gives us an identity, a job, and the power to do that job.



Back several years ago in Akron, Ohio ... I had the opportunity to sit with Shirley Rock, an attorney and the executive director for New Hope, a Christian organization that assists young girls who have gone through the juvenile justice system find a new life and a new hope. I enjoy hearing people's stories, and so as we sat to eat lunch together I asked Shirley how she came to this place in her life. What she told me was quite an eye opener.

When Shirley was very young, she was dating a kid whom her parents disliked. They tried to break up the relationship, but it only caused Shirley to run away from home and move in with her boyfriend. It wasn't very long after that that her boyfriend was arrested. Shirley was all alone with nowhere to turn. Shirley said, "That was the period in my life that I really experienced being homeless and being on the street. Being hungry and finding there's not a lot of milk and peaches and kindness and love and honey in this world." When desperation set in she turned to crime, was caught and went to prison. The day she heard the prison gates slam behind her, she said, was the lowest point in her life. I can only imagine.

While in prison Shirley decided to turn her life around. She became involved in a Bible study group and two years later when Shirley was released from prison ... she was Christian. She moved back with her parents, began to do volunteer work for the church in a food pantry. She saw a larger need and organized a program for young girls who she said, "made some really bad choices along the way ... just as she had."

Having gone through the juvenile justice system herself, Shirley felt God call her into a life of fulltime service to these kinds of kids. "I knew that I could make a difference and so I went to college, became a lawyer, so that I could affect that justice system and those kids. I knew that I had been touched by God and wanted others to experience that same loving touch."

Shirley Rock, like Jeremiah, discovered who she is: God's own child.

Like Jeremiah, she discovered why she is here: to serve God using her own unique talents and gifts.

Like Jeremiah, Shirley Rock discovered that whoever we are, whatever we lack, God will provide power to accomplish that which God has purposed.

Amen and Amen.