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The Prophet Jeremiah
I. Before I Formed You
Jeremiah 1:1-10

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*Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying,
“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.”*

So begins the call of the prophet Jeremiah. And while Jeremiah’s call to be a prophet to the nations is his and not ours, nonetheless much about his call does indeed reflect upon and illumine our own calling from God. Right there at the very start, for example – God saying to Jeremiah, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you*” – that is true of each one of us also. Before each and every one of us was brought into this world from out of our mother’s womb, God already knew us. Indeed, it is God Himself who formed us. So says the Psalmist also:

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . .
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there were none of them.¹*

“*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.*” At the most basic level that means that our lives are not mere accidents of biology, but expressions of God’s purpose and design – we are indeed “*fearfully and wonderfully made.*” Before ever we were born, God wanted you and me to exist. Before ever we were born, God saw us, formed us to be unique and irreplaceable – and of infinite value to Him. Everyone is, in this sense, a child of God – born of the overflow of His love, brought into being by His Holy Spirit, marked by His personal and profound interest in our individual existence.

Which is another way of saying that every single life, every single person, matters to God – and is to be treated by all others accordingly. Shades of what we just heard over and over again in the first letter of John – that we are to love one another as God has first loved us. We are to love one another because every single human being we meet is someone whom God knew before they were born, and whom God brought into being through His love. No one is expendable. No one is without worth. Because every single person matters to God.

Tom Long, noted preacher and professor of preaching, tells of taking his two teenagers, David and Melanie, on a shopping trip to New York City. They parked the car at the Manhattan end of the tunnel, meaning that they had to walk all the way up 42nd Street to get to the shopping district. Now this was a good while ago, back when 42nd Street still appeared to be the central concentration point of all the sleaze, smut, and depravity of the great city. Long writes about walking through this area on that day – he says that his kids “*were trying to look cool but my overriding thoughts were on them, in the middle of all this trash, Melanie and David, my treasure.*”

But amidst that justifiable parental concern, suddenly there came upon him another thought: “*For one brief moment, there entered into my mind the thought that each of these, too – the pimps and the prostitutes and the dope peddlers, the drug addicts – that each of these, too, is somebody’s child, somebody’s treasure.*”² And that even if there was no one back home who might still think of them in this way, God still did. Everyone, in this sense, is God’s child. Everyone, no matter what else is going on in their life for good or for evil, everyone is God’s treasure. For before He formed them in the womb, He knew them, He valued them, He loved them – and He knows and values and loves them still. And always will.

“*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.*” There is something else here, too. God knew us before ever we were born – which means that if we ever truly want to know ourselves, we need to turn to Him, to begin with Him and His knowledge of who we are. For that matter, His knowledge of whom He has formed us to be and to become! If we want to “find” ourselves, as we used to say – the place to begin looking is God. Only by knowing God can we come to a true knowledge of ourselves.

But that is not our way, is it? One of the great myths, going all the way back even to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, is the myth that we are self-made, self-chosen, self-defined, and self-governed. That it is up to us, and us alone, to decide who we are and what we are to become. That quintessentially American poet, Walt Whitman, in his appropriately entitled Song of Myself, sings our song:

*Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am
touch’d from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.
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I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious . . .³*

Okay, maybe we would not go quite that far. But still, this belief that we are the sole makers and choosers of our individual identity is deeply written upon our hearts. This search for self – by, for, from the self – is simply accepted and encoded within our culture as the way we are to go about such matters. No one gets to tell me who I am, except for me! For example, I came across this pledge recited every morning by second-graders in a school system out west somewhere – a pledge reflective of what our culture believes and what we readily teach our own children:

I pledge allegiance to myself, and to who I want to be.

*I can make my dreams come true if I believe in me.
 I pledge to stay in school and learn the things I need to know,
 to make the world a better place for kids like me to grow.
 I promise to keep my dreams alive, and be all that I can be.
 I know I can, and that's because
 I pledge to stay alcohol-, tobacco-, and drug-free!⁴*

That's not the worst pledge we could teach our kids to say, but the problem is that we never do really come to know ourselves solely by searching ourselves – which may be why so many people seem to be a mess these days! And against the bad advice of this myth of self-definition stands nothing less than the Word of God, telling us that the only way we can truly come to know ourselves is by first turning to the One who formed us in our mother's womb, the One who knew us before ever we were, the One who gave us life itself and who will be the One waiting for us when our time here on this earth is done. If we want to know who we really are, then the one only place to begin our search is by coming to know the God who made us. Knowing God is how we come to know ourselves.

Eugene Peterson, writing on this very passage from Jeremiah chapter one, puts this as plainly as possible:

*Our lives are not puzzles to be figured out. Rather, we come to God, who knows us and reveals to us the truth of our lives. The fundamental mistake is to begin with ourselves and not God. God is the center from which all life develops . . .
 . . . There is something previous to what I think about myself, and it is what God thinks of me.⁵*

Or, as the great saint Augustine put the same thought at the very start of his spiritual autobiography: “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and restless are our hearts until they rest in Thee.”⁶

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,” says God to both Jeremiah and to us. By looking to God first, we learn to see ourselves aright. For what we see when we begin with God is precisely all these things we have already been saying – that our lives matter, that we are loved before ever we have taken our first breath. That we are born into this world by a God who already loves us – whose love for us is before ever we are is the very reason we have come into existence. The single most important fact about who we are is that we are, each one, a child of God.

And when we know that, truly deep down in our heart of hearts know that, then the ground beneath our feet turns into a firm foundation – and nothing this world can say to us or say about us can ever shake us from that firm foundation of God's love. Henri Nouwen, wonderful Catholic writer, whose own long search for self led him to precisely this same conclusion, puts it this way:

Your true identity is as a child of God. This is the identity you have to accept. Once you have claimed it and settled in it, you can live in a world that gives you much joy as well as pain. You can receive the praise as well as the blame that comes to you as an

*opportunity for strengthening your basic identity, because the identity that makes you free is anchored beyond all human praise and blame. You belong to God, and it is as a child of God that you are sent into the world.*⁷

“*You belong to God, and it is as a child of God that you are sent into the world.*” That is what it means to us and for us when God tells us, as He tells Jeremiah: “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.*”

Which leads us, then, to the next aspect of Jeremiah’s call from God that we share in common with him and with all others: “*And before you were born I consecrated you.*” To consecrate means to set apart for a holy purpose. This, of course, has a very specific meaning for Jeremiah’s life – he is consecrated by God to play a very specific part at a very specific moment in God’s unfolding plan of salvation. At the time of Jeremiah, God was just about to move His great plan of salvation forward into a new phase – the movement from God’s old covenant with Israel alone into a time of preparation for the coming of God’s new covenant made with all peoples in Jesus Christ. And Jeremiah is set apart, consecrated, to proclaim to Israel this new thing that God is about to do in their midst.

A new thing which has two parts – one, terrible but necessary: Israel is about to be judged, humbled, and brought to repentance for their hard-heartedness in relation to God and His commandments – and we’ll a lot more about this from Jeremiah in the weeks to come. For Jeremiah is called to proclaim the fall of Judah and Jerusalem to the armies of Babylon, and the beginning of the Babylonian exile of God’s people. This is the “plucking up and breaking down, the destroying and overthrowing” God mentions at the end of our passage.

But there is also the glorious, good news second part of this new thing God is about to do through this time of humbling and exile – the “building up and planting” at the end of our passage. As Jeremiah himself will proclaim later in his prophecy – Jeremiah chapter 31:

The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won’t be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant even though I did my part as their Master.

*This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They’ll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I’ll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I’ll forget they ever sinned!*⁸

In other words, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world to be our Savior, forever.

So Jeremiah is consecrated, set apart by God, to play a special role at a special moment in God's unfolding plan of salvation. But that does not mean that we are not also consecrated by God for our time, for our place in God's unfolding plan of salvation. Indeed, the very first part of our consecration by the Lord God is to realize that God **is** unfolding His great plan of salvation still in our day – that we, that our lives, are caught up already is something far greater than merely making a living and “Thank God it's Friday.” To realize, as one theologian puts it, that

When we become baptized, we . . . jump on a moving train . . . We become part of a journey that began long before we got here and shall continue long after we are gone . . . The story began without us, as a story of the peculiar way God is redeeming the world, a story that invites us to come forth and be saved by sharing in the work of a new people whom God has created in Israel and Jesus.⁹

Or another way of saying the same thing, from Robert McAfee Brown's Spirit of Protestantism, one of my first seminary textbooks: “*We do not gaze at the world and then try to understand Christ in terms of the world. We gaze at Jesus Christ and then try to understand the world in terms of him.*” Brown then goes on to explain what he means by that, using the music of that first great Protestant composer, Johann Sebastian Bach:

*The music of one of the greatest Protestant composers provides us with an analogy. Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor consists of a number of variations on a short theme. At first the theme is distinct and clear. As the variations unfold, and the music gets more complicated, the theme is harder and harder to distinguish. Soon the music seems to have no direction or purpose whatever. But **if one is already acquainted with the theme**, he can hear it through all the apparent chaos, holding the music together, giving it direction and force.*

*Protestant faith understands the sovereignty of God in a similar way. What we see and hear often seems to be sheer chaos. Life apparently has no direction or purpose. But the Christian who is **already acquainted with the theme**, having seen and heard it in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, knows that the direction and purpose are there, undergirding the apparent chaos, sustaining it, holding it together. The Christian believes that the theme is still being played, even when his own ears can scarcely detect it. God's mercy is forever sure.¹⁰*

Or, as one of my favorite old hymns puts it:

*God is working his purpose out
As year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out,
And the time is drawing near;*

*Nearer and nearer draws the time,
The time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
As the waters cover the sea.¹¹*

“Before you were born I consecrated you.” You and I, like Jeremiah, are born into God’s great plan of salvation. **We** have been set apart to see what God is doing in all of history – set apart to see how God’s great story is unfolding in our own day, set apart to know and to lift up hope and thanksgiving for the gift of knowing how the story will end.

But, of course, that is not all our consecration means, or requires. God consecrates us, as His children, not just to know and understand His great plan of salvation, but also to become witnesses to God’s plan to others. Like Jeremiah did. And not just to bear witness to God’s plan to others, but to live into God’s great plan of salvation with our own lives. To let God make over our hearts, our lives – that increasingly you and I are able to be evidence to the world in our day, as Jeremiah was in his day – living evidence of the power and the glory and the grace and the goodness of God at work in us, at work in His world, at work in the unfolding of His great plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. We let God “pluck up and break down” in us what is sinful and needs to be removed – even as we also let Him “build up and plant” in us His gifts of new hearts and Kingdom lives here and now, in our own moment and in our own place and in our own distinctive personalities. For His sake and for our own salvation, we let Him begin making us now into the people He always wanted us to be – and shall finally and fully be on that day when His plan is accomplished and the Kingdom comes. We are consecrated – our lives are set apart – by God, for God, to God, in the service of God.

“Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.’ Jeremiah, and you, and me.

¹ Psalm 139:13-14, 16.

² Source unknown.

³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), p. 49.

⁴ Quoted in Douglas D. Webster, *Soulcraft* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 47-48.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 38.

⁶ *Confessions*, I/1.

⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 70.

⁸ Jeremiah 31:31-34, Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1422.

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 52.

¹⁰ Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 82-83.

¹¹ Arthur Campbell Ainger.