

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Hebrews 12:18-29; Jeremiah 1:4-10

“God With Us”

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God equips the called. God does not call the equipped. Now let me say that one more time: God equips the called. God does not call the equipped. In other words, God calls you, then God equips you for the ministry by which you were called, God doesn't just wait around until you have figured it out, until you have learned enough, until you have become faithful enough, and then call you. God calls you, and then promises in the call moment, that you will be able to do that which God has called you; because the Holy Spirit will empower you, will teach you and will provide you with the moments of experience and learning and understanding and maturity necessary to fulfill that call.

That is what happened to Jeremiah. Jeremiah was just a boy when God called him, and God said, “I knew you from before you were in the womb.” God had a plan for his life, before he was even born. At the age of 12 or 13, imagine that, God said, “I want you to speak on my behalf to all of the nations.” Well, no wonder he said, “I'm only a boy.” I would have said, “Are you nuts?” [Laughter.]

And then God explains God's self to poor little Jeremiah. Now Jeremiah had a little bit of experience. His father, Hilkiyah, was a priest in a little community about two or three miles north of Jerusalem. Now, in that little two or three miles, thousands of years ago, that was a long way. You didn't just jump in the car and hop over there. But it wasn't that far. They could make it in less than a day's journey. So Jeremiah knew the temple, understood the religious experience and probably heard his father complaining about the corruption, the unfaithfulness and the things that would need to happen, for the people to live up to their expectations that God had for them.

Rather than be a benefit, it probably scared Jeremiah even worse to know how difficult his task would be. But God said, “No, I'm going to use you.” Now, poor Jeremiah was stuck, not only with an enormous call, but Jeremiah was placed in one of those rare moments of history, where he would be swept up and overcome by the powers at hand.

So, for example, you would have people who graduated from high school in the late 1930s and 1940s. Their lives would be overwhelmed by history. They wouldn't have control over their own lives, especially if they were a man, but for many women as well, and in many different ways. Because, if you graduated from high school in the late 1930s or early 1940s, you would be impacted by World War II. If you were a man, you would be drafted. If you were a woman, you figured out how you could participate. Some women helped out and actually became part of the military, even in a time where it was very difficult for women to have those opportunities. Other people – both men and women alike – who were not in the war had to struggle to make ends meet, worked in the war effort. Rosie the Riveter, all of the other things that happened. Life was transformed by historical, painful moments in history.

And Jeremiah had one of those moments. He was born in 640 BCE. Now, if that doesn't mean a whole lot to you – there was one date, if you just remember just one date in all of Old Testament history, you are supposed to remember: 586 BCE. That is the year that the Temple in Jerusalem fell the first time and the people were carted away to Babylon. So Jeremiah was born in 640 then 39, 38, 37 – we are working to 586. Jeremiah was called by God to warn the people that if they did not behave themselves, if they did not follow the law, if they didn't do what they were supposed to do, something horrible would happen and their world would be upended, because of their faithlessness. And, sure enough, poor Jeremiah had to speak for 40 years and, sure enough, he ended up with everything he said coming true. The people didn't listen to him or, should I say, the people didn't listen to God, because God put God's words into Jeremiah's mouth; and, as often as Jeremiah spoke, the people fought him, over and over again, until the walls came tumbling down, and they were cast into exile. Poor Jeremiah's life was just that kind of struggle.

But, his call wasn't wrong, because he didn't share with the people what the people wanted to hear. Even more so, his call was validated, even though the people didn't do what he asked them to do. It was his call to speak God's word; it wasn't his responsibility to get them to believe. There is a difference. You tell the people what they need to hear, but you can't make them believe. And, the reason I'm emphasizing that is calls come in different ways. Jeremiah's call was to proclaim the message, before the people lost their faith, and lost their Temple, and were cast into exile.

But there are many different kinds of calls, and as I watched the kids have their backpack experience this morning, I thought about a different kind of experience – a different kind of calling and that of parenting. I'm envious when I see the little ones come up and get their backpacks blessed, and I remember when my little one got her backpack blessed, and I'm looking forward to my little one gets his backpack blessed – but it's the grandson's turn. Those are exciting moments. And, I want to talk, in this moment when parents are excited and they are getting back into the routine of fall, about the call of parenting. It, too, is difficult because, even though you can use God's words, you can't force a child's response. You can only do the parenting you can do; and, the Holy Spirit has to mold and help guide your child.

I was reading this wonderful book, which I struggle with and I fight with in different parts. I don't know any parenting book that is actually that great, but one of them that I do appreciate is called "Sacred Parenting" by Gary Thomas. Gary Thomas is a pastor and he has watched parents struggle, and he said – especially in the last decade or so – parents have become more and more wrapped up in children's lives, and their call has been so difficult, because what is demanded of parents now. To go with them, and travel with them every evening, to one sport event or one social activity, or some school event. Parents don't have any lives themselves, and their kids are involved in so much, they don't even have time to think. So, he sat down and wrote a book about what parenting should be like and, perhaps, how God could be more involved in calming the anxiety of parents who are struggling so mightily, with all of the demands that are placed before them.

The first thing that Gary Thomas said is, "Parenting is a divine call from God." So when you become a parent are you equipped – if you were, I'm pretty impressed. I was not. It is amazing that Hannah is still alive. [Laughter.]

I was telling somebody before the service – his wife is gone for a week and he has both the kids – and I said, “You know that happened to me once. My wife was gone on a business thing and when she got back – she was a school nurse in that school – and the principal said, ‘never leave him alone with her again.’” [Laughter.]

One day I forgot her lunch. The next day, her hair was a mess, I was the worst parent in the entire world. [Scott laughs.] I can joke now, but at the time it was pretty horrifying. I had great excuses, but she didn’t think they were that great. I wish I had had this book in front of me, because Gary Thomas says your call, as a parent, is to raise God’s child. You are called to do the very best you can, but you have to know that the Holy Spirit is helping you to raise God’s child. So, when you mess up so bad that your child goes to school with her hair a mess, or she is carrying a lunch bag, but you forgot that it was yesterday’s, and you forgot to give her lunch money, the Holy Spirit will help you figure that out, or save you from your wife, when she hears about it from the principal [Laughter.].

He said, and I think it is so true, that none of us are equipped for our call – including parenting. What we can do is to understand that God will work with us in that process. And, why is that so important? Because you aren’t raising your child alone. So when your child, at two-years-old, throws a wicked tantrum, it’s God’s fault. [Laughter.] It isn’t just my fault, because I didn’t figure out how to stop the child from the tantrum before we went to HyVee, and everyone we know was there, while she was having the tantrum.

As we get older and they make other mistakes, you can let go and get a little separation. It doesn’t define who you are, or even your parenting, when your child makes a mistake, throws a tantrum or doesn’t look good in the eyes of others, or embarrasses you somehow. Because it isn’t about you. It isn’t about you as a parent. It’s about you and God raising that child, so that they can become healthy, emotionally, spiritually and physically.

If they make mistakes or have their tantrums, it isn’t a reflection on you. It is an opportunity for you to show them a healthier, more-meaningful way of expressing themselves – when you realize that it isn’t about you.

Thomas talks about “child-centered” parenting. If you are a child-centered parent, when that child does something wrong, it is your parenting that wasn’t good enough. Well, no wonder you get anxious. And, the more you are anxious, the more your child feels that anxiety; and, all of a sudden, you don’t think you are a good enough parent, and now that child knows it, because they feel your anxiety and, no wonder there are more tantrums.

But, it is a shift to “God-centered” parenting, according to Gary Thomas, the minute you realize that your activity as a parent is to raise a Godly child, whose responsibility it is, is not only mine – as a parent – but also God’s and the Holy Spirit’s to move through that child.

Now, I’m not sitting there going, “Oh, my gosh, I’m so embarrassed because she saw me – my child – have a tantrum at the Hy Vee,” I can say now, how in this moment, “Dear God how do I help little so-and-so here – my beloved child – who’s not really acting very beloved right now,

learn from this moment? How can I love them, and yet hold them accountable for this moment, in a way that will help them?”

Gary Thomas said that call to becoming “God-centered” as a parent, is so important today, because so many parents have become so overwhelmed with taking care of all of their child’s needs, that they don’t know how to make a mistake. They are scared to make a mistake, because mom or dad, or both, are following right behind them, making sure that it never happens. As a “child-centered” parent what they do is a reflection of me. “I’d better make sure they never make a mistake, because if they do I will look bad.”

It isn’t about me as the parent, it is about the child.

Then Gary Thomas does the most remarkable thing. He said, “Go back and look in the Bible.” (I hate it when they do that.) And he said, “Look at Jesus. God is Jesus’ father” (excuse me for the patriarchal language in that moment), he allowed Jesus to suffer, to make difficult decisions, and to stand behind them, and even land on a cross at the end of his life, and we have to assume – because it was God – it was the right thing for the right purpose and, still, God is Jesus’ parent. He said, in the same way God treated others, whom he knew before the womb – like Jeremiah – and let them suffer as Jeremiah did for 40 years, sharing a word that no one would ever listen to, and God probably knew it, but it had to be said.

So, he turns to the parent and said, “As a God-centered parent, don’t let your child run out in front of traffic because they might get hit by a truck,” That is good parenting. That is being responsible. But there are moments where your child should be allowed to make mistakes, without your intervention, so that they can learn how to work them out, how to seek forgiveness; how to play nice with others, how to seek forgiveness, how to heal from pain.

If parents are always following behind, the day will come when you won’t be there; maybe it’s when they move out of your basement when they are 40. But, the day will come when you won’t be there and they won’t know where to go for forgiveness. They won’t know how to relate to authority figures above them, friends beside them, or people looking up to them. They won’t know how to seek forgiveness from God, or other people and, so, becoming a God-centered parent with healthy children who figure out how to be responsible for their actions and know how to pick themselves up when they fail and try again, is as much incumbent on a parent knowing their role and their place in the call process; to stop their lives from being lost, but to let them learn and then to be there when they go, “Mom or Dad, I don’t know what to do.” Then the call kicks in, and in a non-anxious way, fulfill the call by saying, “What happened? How did you do it? How might you do it differently? How might we get through this together, in prayer and with God’s help?”

Jeremiah was able to survive those 40 years, guide the people through the pain and loss of the fall, and the exile, and then to help them understand that they would one day be restored – because God helped Jeremiah through his pain and his suffering, helped him to forgive, heal and be restored.

And, that is our call as parents and grandparents. That’s our call as friends and family who care for children: to help them do it themselves. And, it is a hard process. So, on this day, as we look

to going back to school, and we talk about the call process, I hope you take a time sometime today to pray for parents and the very difficult calling that parenting is; that they will see it as a sacred moment, so that they don't have to do it by themselves, and they can let go and not be judged by everything their children do, but that God has responsibility with the parent, and that makes the child, the parent and God come together as one whole – God blessed. I hope your next week, as all are back to school, goes well and you feel your call at work. Amen.