

**May you always in life find your voice and sing your song...**

Confirmation Sermon for Ioris, Merle & Elisha

Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

Sisters and brothers, Merle, Ioris and Elisha, friends,  
do you realize that God needs you? Do you understand that you are God's partner, just as Nelson Mandela was, and just as Desmond Tutu and Ellen Sirleaf Johnson are?  
When there is someone hungry, God wants to perform the miracle of feeding that person. But it won't be any longer through Manna falling from heaven. It is us who have to – in the name of God – provide the means to feed the hungry. We all need to agree that we are God's fellow workers helping God performing miracles.

There are many Bible stories which show us the divine-human partnership.  
There is this story of God choosing Mary, a teenager in a small village, to be the mother of his son. He sent an angel to visit her. And we can imagine what happened...  
“Mary”, the angel might have said, “God would like you to be the mother of his son.” And Mary could have sent him next door, telling the angel clearly that she wasn't a fool to expose herself to all sorts of trouble that would await an unmarried single mom in those days.  
But Mary didn't.  
Fortunately she said her famous Yes, and we can imagine God sighing a cosmic sigh of relief at that.  
Mary was a poor teenage girl in Galilee and reminds us that transformation and reformation in our world can come from the most unlikely places and through the most unlikely people.

Who would have thought when Nelson Mandela was born in a tiny village that one day he would be the leader of a nation? It is the actions of courageous ordinary people who inspired, and still inspire, others. Only with role models can we stand up for the truth and strive for change. Only with role models can we speak out for human rights where these are being violated, stand up for justice, freedom, human dignity and love where they are trampled underfoot...  
God calls us to be his partners to work for a new kind of society where people count; where people matter more than things, more than possessions; where people will be safe and not suffer from the fear of hunger, from ignorance and from disease; where there will be caring and sharing, compassion and laughter, peace and not war!  
We may find this hard, and we may come up with excuses as Jeremiah did. But we can learn from his story...

The young Jeremiah was called into partnership with God.  
I know you – are the words God speaks to Jeremiah in our OT reading.  
They are sort of poured over him as a big surprise – frightening even – but also like a true declaration of love. I know you.  
Jeremiah hears it, is touched by it, and tries to escape from it.  
I know you.  
I know who you are. I know where you come from, and where your paths will lead you. I know the places of your past and your future. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.”  
I know your successes and your failures. I know your dark and your bright sides. I know your guilt and your courage, your dreams and your tears... and I need you.  
God needs us all – just as we are!

Before you were born, I consecrated you, I appointed you. I have a job for you, a mission, a purpose in life.  
Isn't that poetry to our ears?  
I know you and I need you – spoken by nobody less than God?!

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And what does Jeremiah answer?

*6 Then I said, «Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.»*

I am only...

He tries to get away without fulfilling the task God has already given to him.

*...I appointed you a prophet to the nations.»*

...a prophet to the nations, this was just too much for Jeremiah, and he says: No, thank you!

But God wouldn't be God, if he didn't immediately respond.

*Do not say, I am only a boy...*

Don't do this.

Don't say this.

You will do it... you'll go and speak –

and I will be with you.

We have heard God saying this to other great leaders. Remember Moses and the burning bush? Joshua at the river and so many others...

You'll do it!

In Jeremiah's case God goes even further. It is not only that God is with Jeremiah. God promises to provide what Jeremiah will need.

*«Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

God touches... physically... raises up and strengthens – just as Jesus did in so many of his stories of healing.

It is God's touch and tenderness that eventually help Jeremiah to see beyond the burden to God's promise!

We don't hear Jeremiah express his change of mind! But obviously he lets God continue to speak and describe the mission he has chosen Jeremiah for.

*9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, «Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

*10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.»*

There is so much to do – and nothing nice and easy ...

pluck up and pull down

destroy and overthrow

build and plant...

There is much work to be done then and now to fulfil God's plan, and as Desmond Tutu often says, God's dream. And to bring about change in the world may often take much longer than we would have hoped and dreamed. Ellen Sirleaf Johnson had to live in exile, Nelson Mandela for 27 years called a prison cell his home, and Desmond Tutu had to spend times abroad because his life was not safe in South Africa in the time of apartheid...

And I imagine how often God must have spoken to them and many of their friends saying: I know you! You can do it!

They all might have had their excuses, their feelings of doubt and inadequacy, but they all must have also felt the confirming words and the divine equipment God was offering them to do the job. God needed them, as he needs us.

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God's promise to be with us, to provide what we need in life, because he has made us, called us, and appointed us, doesn't necessarily mean that we will only live on the sunny side of life! Babylon – where Jeremiah was sending words of encouragement to support those Israelites in captivity there – had rose gardens, but not for Jeremiah's people. Jeremiah's rose gardens were in his heart and mind, in the thoughts he shared, in the faith he held fast, and in the beautiful poetry of his famous letters with which he encouraged generations of Israelites to live and carry on!

If it is true that God knows us... that he's made us in the womb (and this is not a scientific but a philosophical statement. The question is not so much, where I come from – physically – but where I belong – emotionally)...

...if it is true that God knows us and needs us, then it is also true, as it was for Jeremiah, that we can stick to God's appointment for us and fulfil our calling.

As Jeremiah had hope and comfort, poetry and beauty in his heart, we can have it too. And as Jeremiah could share all this with others – even in the most difficult and dangerous situations – we can share it too.

Let's remember our great mothers and fathers of faith and understand that however uncertain and nervous, however disappointed and sad, however desperate and weak people may feel, the "I know you", God speaks to all of us at all times, wants to lift us up and make us strong – just as Jesus lifted up people and made them strong.

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I know you; I need you"

Take this as God's personal approach to you today. Hold fast to it and discover who you are in God's eyes... and who you are meant to be.

Merle, Ioris, Elisha, may one day friends say about you:

"Our world is a better place for having had a Merle, a Ioris and an Elisha... they were amazing, and I feel blessed that they were my friends!"

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Let me finish with a version of Psalm 139 that expresses what I wish for you three and for all of us here in this church today:

God of all time,

I believe that my past, present and future are in your hands.

God of all places,

I believe that there is nowhere I may go  
where you are not there before me.

God of all life,

I believe that the vastest movements of the cosmos  
and the most intimate thoughts of the human heart  
are both of concern to you.

God of all experience,

I believe that the heights and depths of human aspiration and anguish  
are known alike to you.

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Help me to find my voice and to sing my song:  
in the time that you have given me  
in the places I find myself  
in the life that is mine to live.  
Amen.