

I'm With You to Deliver You 2020
 Jeremiah 1:4-8 Matthew 10:24-33, 39

Jeremiah 1:4-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

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." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

Matthew 10:24-32, 39 (New Revised Standard Version)

A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Quite a few of my friends from high school are on Facebook with me,
 and several of them seem to have way too much time on their hands.

Lately they have been posting old photographs from back then,
 embarrassing reminders of my keen fashion sense as a teenager.
 It's troubling to recall how very important it seemed back then
 to look groovy and cool, and be accepted by the right crowd.

And the funny or ironic thing is, looking at those old pictures,
 I can remember the moment or event when the photo was taken,
 but I don't remember many of the names of those folks,
 whose judgment was of such consequence back then,
 and whose opinion mattered so very much to me.

And as it turns out, with several more decades of life-experience,
 much of what once seemed so vital and of critical significance,
 was actually pretty insignificant and made little difference.

I realize today, I was troubled by things that didn't really matter.

**That has been a very helpful insight and perspective to hold onto,
 especially during these months of covid-19 uncertainty and chaos.**

The media overwhelms us with distressing bad news
 of our culture's discord and hatred, violence and aggression
 that allows little room for calm reflection or thoughtful nuance.

It's so easy to get caught up in a fearful bad-news-panic.
Surely, no one would choose to live through such times as these.

But consider God's promising assurance and call to young Jeremiah,
who lived through Israel's destruction by the Babylonians. vs. 5, 7-8

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; ... for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.

Jeremiah was a unique prophet who served the Lord faithfully
during a uniquely difficult and distressing time of chaos.

So too each one of us is special & unique – **you are each like no other.**
Every single person ever created throughout all human history
has always been special and unique – and like no one else.

We are each one different – uniquely special, gifted and loved.
As God explained, even before you were formed in your mother's womb,
you were already entirely known, precious, blessed & loved by God.

Even before you were born, God had already chosen and arranged
particular gifts and abilities equipping you to serve usefully,
and to live an abundant & blessed, meaningful and joyful life.
That is an incredibly amazing and wonderfully important truth.

That is a powerful trust because that means,
God's love for us does not depend upon our goodness or faithfulness,
but rather it is entirely
by God's choice, steadfast mercy and eternal faithfulness,
which means that even before we were born or Creation even began,
we were already infinitely loved and always will be loved by God...
... and that amazing truth even gets better!

**God specifically gifted and blessed and equipped each one of us
to fulfill his gracious will and saving purpose during whatever
circumstance-of-life the Lord has placed us in which to live...**

... which means that,
**God never places anything before us, nor assigns any task to us,
without also providing all the means and resources we need
to make it through with God's help every step along the way.**
**So believing the truth of God's word and declaration,
by faith and trust, no need to worry, and don't be afraid or panic,
for I will be with you to comfort & guide, to bless & deliver you.**

That was the message to young Jeremiah and also to us.
God didn't just create us with unique physical characteristics,
but also uses the circumstances of our life to reshaped us,

for people and the events to help us develop and grow.

**Scripture assures us that even failure, struggles and trials in life,
the Lord can use to heal & transform toward our growth and benefit,
that we may know the limitless love and blessings of our God.**

As God declared to Jeremiah,

I am your God. I love you and I will work it out for you...

**... which means that if I ask you to do it or put you there,
then surely I'll also equip you and bring you through.**

Jesus echoes a similar message of hope speaking to his disciples,
to prepare them for the struggles & rejection they'd face. vs. 24-25

A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the
disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of
the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

Jesus wanted them to know in advance,

that to follow him would be costly at times and come at a high price,
and that **a life of faithful discipleship would always not be easy.**

The Gospel of Matthew was written to an early Christian community,
that was having an extremely difficult and tough time of it.

Some had been imprisoned, others were being killed for their faith,
and so the author is reminding them of what Jesus had said
about faith & discipleship, suffering and being rejected.

But at the same time, this is a message of promise and encouragement.

The message was to strengthen Matthew's beleaguered community,
teaching that you don't need to be hesitant or afraid
of the hostility into which you have been sent ... vs. 26, 29-31

So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing
secret that will not become known. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them
will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted.
So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Don't panic or be frightened, for God is very much aware
of all that is happening, all that you do and endure.

The world may not know it or appreciate it, but God recognizes
even if no one else notices, when we choose to be faithful & obey.

Our assurance is that God is sovereign. God is aware and cares.

And even more than falling hair or sparrows,
we are important to God, who is always faithful...

... which means not a hair or a sparrow or even a scary virus

can exist or do anything outside or beyond
God's creative, sustaining, and fulfilling love.

That's not to say we won't ever suffer or face difficult problems,
but we are promised and assured that God is with us always,
even in the tiniest and most hidden details of our lives,
which God can somehow transform toward our good and growth.

Each of us and everything that we do, it all does matter to God,
so don't let this world demean or deny the truth of our worth...
... for we are all of the precious family of our faithful God,
and fear cannot crush those who trust in the Lord,
because we know that God is up to something good.

**Today is our time to be faithful and obedient, to trust and serve,
and to live beyond the fear, trepidation and uncertainty around us.**

May these Scripture passages about hope and God's promise
encourage us all, strengthen us & move us to commit ourselves
to live in ways that proclaim the Goods News of God's abiding grace.

The life of an active & growing faith that God desires for us,
is much more than just receiving a KOG participation trophy.

In contrast to the strife and disharmony exploding in our culture,
**it is standing firm in God's grace and mercy, peace and calm
in ways that the Gospel of Jesus Christ can flow through us.**

The call today is to trust God's grace, his will & his purpose for us,
and that even amid the worst of chaos & confusion, suffering & loss,
know God is up to something gracious & magnificent for us,
because we are loved and because God wants good for us,
and because God wants to bless the world through us.

**These days are our time, our turn to be faithful and obedient,
to trust God's healing and saving power, purpose and grace.**

This fable may shed some light on what that might look like.

Once upon a time there was a little caterpillar, let's call him, Bob.
He would spend his days crawling around and eating leaves,
and his nights sleeping on tree branches, life was good.

But sometimes Bob heard rumors from other caterpillars,
that in the fall it was customary among caterpillars
to go into a dark cocoon for a while,
and then to emerge, changed into a butterfly.

Bob of course had no use for such nonsense and foolishness.
He saw no reason to believe

in such mythical – magical creatures as butterflies,
certainly he had never met one.

So all summer Bob and his buds filled up on the plentiful leaves,
but then toward fall some of the other caterpillars
started to spin little cocoons for themselves
and then they would seal themselves up inside them.

Bob was pretty upset and frightened by it all, and it made no sense.
Why would his caterpillar friends be doing such a thing?

Bob could see that the cocoons were small, cramped and dark,
that his friends inside were unable to move or to see,
and they were certainly unable to munch on green leaves.
It was as if they had willingly crawled into a tomb.

But then one day Bob did an amazing thing.
Despite his fear and trepidation, his panic and anxious dread,
he began weaving his own cocoon, though he didn't know why.
Then taking what he imagined would be
his last bite of succulent leaf before death,
he crawled on inside. He sealed it and went to sleep.

All winter he stayed inside that cocoon,
occasionally he'd awaken, feel the cold and drift back to sleep.
But then one warm spring day after the long cold winter,
Bob woke up and felt refreshed with an urge to wiggle around.

In his restlessness he burst open his cocoon.
Once out of the confining cocoon he shock himself free,
and was stunned beyond belief, to see and feel again.
Then Bob was shocked when his four magnificent wings unfurled.

His wings were delicate and beautiful with bold bright colors.
His chubby caterpillar body was now thin, graceful and strong.

It was with incredible joy and delight,
that Bob found himself soaring effortlessly on the wind.

Out of what he believed would lead to disaster and death,
Bob emerged to something new - true joy and a glorious new life,
even more wonderful than the life he had been afraid to lose.

Jesus said: 32, 39

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Now in our modern culture, we do like to think we are in control,
as in Frank Sinatra's theme song, "I did it my way",
and that if we work hard at it, by our own good efforts
we can change the world and accomplish God's promises.

But the basic point and essential truth of the Bible,
is absolute surrender to God and submission to God's will...
**because God is somewhat more powerful and perfect than we are,
and because God has something somewhat better in mind for us.**

When I turn on my computer, I don't want it doing its own thing.
I want it to surrender to my will – to do my thing,
for only then can it fulfill its purpose.

When I pick up a hammer,
I don't want to hear it singing, "I did it my way".
I don't want to feel it pounding on my thumb,
but to drive in the nail exactly where I want it,
and only then can my hammer fulfill its purpose.

God's call is for us to surrender to his will and his purpose for us,
even amid the worst of chaos, disaster and confusion around us,
trusting that God has something magnificent in mind for us,
because we are loved and because God wants good for us.

So today as our world and culture are spinning out of control
this is not a time to surrender to fear, dread or panic,
but instead look for where God's grace is at work,
look for where there is good, generosity & justice...

... for in God, in God's promises, in God's love and truth alone,
there we will find courage and strength, our hope and comfort,
even amid the brokenness, hatred, malice & violence of today.

Our call this day, is to live lives that reflect and proclaim
our hope and trust in the promises and present-work of the Lord,
just as we read (Heidelberg Catechism) earlier in our worship today,

Q1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A1. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ,
... indeed, everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, I am wholeheartedly
willing and ready from now on to live for him.