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PRAY FOR THE ENTIRE WORLD

Jim Wood, Pastor

Welcome to my home today. Glad you are here. We are grateful that you have joined us and we hope that you feel something of the love and the promises of God as you are with us today. If you are watching online, we welcome you as well. (Hi, mom!) We are extremely blessed to be together as a family to worship in freedom, and to have those promises in our life is an overwhelming thing.

As we gather today, we want to encourage ourselves to be the people of God. The way we begin to encouraging ourselves is, not only to celebrate him, but to turn to his Word and see what it might say to us. In any given day, it's a living Word, it changes. *It* doesn't change, but *we* change as we read it and as we find something new. The depth of it overwhelms us.

This morning, our Old Testament lesson is a text that, perhaps, a number of us have heard over the years, but it is one that, I believe, can speak a new word for us today if we are open to it. It's the beginning of the book of Jeremiah, the fourth through the tenth verse.

Jeremiah is a wonderful and incredible prophet, but, in this story, we find how God laid his call upon him and what that call actually means.

Listen for what God's Word is for us today:

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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.' 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. 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.'

In the New Testament, we are reading in chapter four beginning with verse seven in Paul's second letter to the Corinthian Church. This is an incredible passage. Jim Gates was talking about this earlier in the week in our staff worship, and he said that early on in his Christian walk, he loved the band Jars of Clay. But when he realized the name of the band was from the Bible when he finally came across this passage, it brought even transforming meaning to him. We are going to talk about this verse in a few minutes, but let's hear what it says to us today.

Listen for the Word of the Lord:

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I always like to celebrate things that we can in the life of our congregation and a selfish special shout-out today for something you might have seen if you picked up the The Virginian-Pilot newspaper and read it today. Boy! There are two good-looking guys on the cover of today's Magazine section, one who happens to be Zach Wood, and the other is K Ishibashi, both of whom are connected to the life of our church. Zach is actually serving coffee out there right now. They get their good looks from their moms. It's kind of a cool article, and I would encourage you to bring in any leftover copies of that article. I know some moms and perhaps dads who would be happy for that. It's nice to see our young folks in our congregation celebrated.

We are in our family having a great time. It's a good season for our family except that right now we miss, particularly during the holidays, not being complete because our oldest son Ross is working in the Peace Corps in Morocco. It's been about a year and a half since we have seen him.

I think at holiday seasons you miss each other a little bit more. So we decided that we were going to put together a care package for Ross. You know, you do the same kind of things you do for a 25-26 year old kid, you know, you send them care packages with underwear and some cookies and things like that. But Ross had said, "Be careful when you send me a care package. Don't send me anything that is Christian at all. You can't send me a Bible, and you can't send me

any books that talk about Christmas. You can't send me any of that because it would be confiscated."

It's something that has interested me and that I am trying to sort out. (I don't mean this in any way as a political commentary.) But it's interesting that Morocco is 1.1% Christian. They have in their constitution what they believe is a freedom of religion, meaning that that 1.1% can worship freely, but they can't share the Gospel with anyone. If someone who is not a Christian becomes a Christian, that person is actually potentially at risk of their own death. Not just by the way people view them, but governmentally.

I'm not sure that's what we would understand as freedom of religion. I know our administration has been talking about how they might restrict aid for nations which hold to certain positions on issues and which I honestly think is appropriate. But it's interesting to me that between 2009 and 2013, we will have sent \$131.5 million in aid to Morocco.

There again, I really am in the process of thinking through this. What I think very often happens is that we accept this world view that, whoever God already has, that's just the way it is. Freedom of religion increasingly means that if I'm born a Hindu, if I'm born a Muslim, or if I'm born a Christian, I should be able to celebrate and to worship in that way. But what about a faith that talks about going to all the nations, or a faith that talks about sharing a love that can bring hope and promise to a broken world?

What about a faith that is based primarily and, I would say, exclusively on the belief that our God is a God who's been on a mission from the very beginning? How do we wrestle with that? How is it that we might accept the question of "Who does God have?" We might answer, "Well he has those who are already Christians, or say they are Christians, or those who are born into it." I don't know if that makes any sense to you, but the question of "Who does God have?" is something that I believe we really need to reflect on and consider as we go forward.

Since we couldn't send Ross anything about Christmas or anything that was Christian, we decided to send a book that, as you read it, records your voices. So, when Ross opened the book, he'd hear our voices reading the story to him. We chose *Happy Feet* from the *Happy*

Feet movie. When Ross opens his package, he is going to wonder, "What in the world...a kids' book with recorded voices on it?" 😊

Who does God have? It's a question that we as Presbyterians have struggled with for centuries. It's sort of the baggage we carry as Presbyterians. It really is one of the greatest things we have. However, often the greatest thing you have also has some baggage that gets attached to it. What does it mean to believe that God has you? What is it to be elect? We are often kind of beat up among other traditions about our belief in the elect. The fact that it shows up 14 times in the New Testament doesn't seem to matter to those who want to beat us up. We will hear a passage that certainly clearly speaks of that today.

But what is it to be elect? What is it to be predestined? The reason we are beat up is not because our theology has been misunderstood by the world, I believe, but it's because we've misunderstood it over time. What we have basically accepted is the belief that to be predestined or to be elect means that God picked you, God chose you. You don't know why he chose you, but he chose you over anybody else. God chose you to have eternal life. God chose you to live in this life of grace. And it's all about me if God chose me.

Well, that's the furthest from what John Calvin thought election was. I look at Karl Barth, the 20th century great theologian. Karl Barth actually said that Jesus alone was elected. When you look at it in the Scriptures, it says that Jesus alone is elected; and, when we look at election, it means that we are elected in Jesus who is the chosen one.

But what is it to be called or picked or chosen by God? Our passage in Jeremiah is very clear: without any question God had Jeremiah. He had him from the very beginning. I don't mean the beginning of Jeremiah's life but, in essence, from the beginning of time. It says, *"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.'" I mean, God had Jeremiah. It had nothing to do with who Jeremiah was, where he had come from, or what he had done. God had him. I think in this passage that it's not only that we would look at it and say, "Well, very clearly Jeremiah is a great prophet; he did all these*

things; we still read his works....” I believe that there is also a key in this to whom else God might have.

First of all, if you look at this call, it’s very, very clear that God didn’t call Jeremiah and say, “Jeremiah, before you were formed in the womb, before you were born, I decided I was going to bless you with all these things, I was going to give you this stuff, I was going to give you eternal—I was going to do all these things because you are just really cool—even before you came to be, Jeremiah.” It’s very, very clear that Jeremiah is chosen on behalf of others.

If you read the Scriptures, you will find that throughout. Everyone who is called in the Scriptures is actually called on behalf of others. It’s not about what I get out of it, but it’s about what God does through me so that others might get something or be blessed or be benefited in some way.

So we begin by realizing that every call that God has for us, every election that we have, means that we are elected to serve. We are elected to be something for other people. We are elected, we are called, we are chosen, whatever language we want to use, whether we want to claim what another tradition might call prevenient grace, ...whatever it is, we are called by God for a purpose and that purpose never has everything to do with me.

It certainly offers me eternal life. It gives me incredible things; but, if that’s where it stops, it’s almost a guarantee for you that you’ve really got it wrong. It’s not about me; it’s about what God will do through me for others in this broken world. So, the very first thing for us to realize is that a key to understanding Jeremiah is that Jeremiah, as all prophets—and not only prophets, but I would say all who are called—are chosen on behalf of others.

The second thing in this that is so amazing to me, and think that this comes across in really all the calls that we find is that not only are we chosen on behalf of others, but listen to the way Jeremiah says it: “I did all this for you: “*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.’” Partly he’s doing the guy thing; he’s trying to get out of it. But here is the other thing that he is

doing. He's saying, "I'm not equipped for this. This isn't what I really think I should be doing. It's not where my gifts are, it's not where my skills are honed. I'm just a boy; I'm not cut out for this." Here's the thing we find—and we find it throughout Scripture, we find that when God calls us, he doesn't call us already equipped; he equips us after he calls us. Even more significantly, he often calls us into those places of our greatest weakness.

Let's consider that for a minute. Paul words it by talking about having this treasure in clay jars. Keep in mind, Corinth was an interesting city. I really think that Colley is like the Corinth of Hampton Roads, and here's why I mean that. Corinth was between two great bodies of water where commerce went through. It wasn't on the coast, but it was in between, and it was on a road that almost all commerce between those two great bodies of water came through. Because of that, it was an eclectic gathering of people. People from all different kinds of nations, nationalities, ethnic groups, ...--all of that—were all kind of congregated in Corinth. With that it brought all kinds of things.

It brought great wealth. Corinth was an overwhelmingly wealthy place. When you have overwhelming wealth, you often have great disparity among people; you have great poverty. I don't know if you read in the paper or saw online that one family in the US—it's an extended family—but one family has as much money as do the 30 percent poorest people in the US. One family. Now, I'm not faulting that in any way. I'm just saying that with this great incredible wealth comes often comes this great disparity. Disparity is there.

But here's the challenge that was going on in Corinth. If Paul was only reaching the poor people everything would have probably worked out okay, but that wasn't happening. The Holy Spirit was reaching the wealthy people as well, and it was bringing them together. It was bringing together people of all different ethnicities and backgrounds. But it was really the wealth and the poverty, more than anything else, which were causing the rub.

Paul starts talking about drinking condemnation on yourself in communion. What he is talking about in that is basically the people who were wealthy and who didn't have to work would get there early. They would drink up and eat up everything so that there was

nothing left for the poor when they got off work. And so there are these issues of being in the world but not of the world, and perhaps the Corinthians were too much in the world and of the world. So, Paul starts talking to them, and he wants them to not believe a prosperity theology. He knows that this prosperity theology is going to ultimately destroy them.

What I mean by that is that Paul doesn't want to say, "Wow, look at what you have. You have it because God wanted you to have it, because God blessed you, because God elected you to have it." No! He says, "But we have this treasure in clay jars." Clay jars. Not something suitable that most of the people would want to serve anything in. They would have something that would be much nicer. "We have this treasure in clay jars." And then he goes on and he says, "So that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

You see, what happens is that when we have success in our lives, so very often that success breeds a distrust in God or a distance from God. It's like, "Well, you know, I'm really grateful." But, over time it starts to be, "You know, I'm really pretty cool. I'm really pretty effective at this. I'm really good at this." And so Paul says that we have it in clay jars so that it doesn't confuse us. And then he says, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

Here is the point in this. You see, we read this passage and we want to say, "Well, when you become a Christian God is going to start beating you up. I mean it just kind of happens that way." That's not what Paul is actually saying. It's not like God is going to do that to you to test you to see whether you still trust in him. What Paul is actually saying, I believe, is that, "God elected us, God called us, God chose us; and he chose us to remain vulnerable because it's in that vulnerability that others come to know the true promises of God." If someone is drawn to me simply because I am successful, and I say, "Well, let me tell you it's because of Jesus." What happens to the many people who never tasted that? You see what Paul wants to do is to say that when you are called, you are called on behalf of others; but, you are also called to live into your weakness. God calls us from and to our weakness.

Now, bear with me for a minute because I think this is the key to everything and to our understanding of the call of God: God calls us from and to our weakness. He calls us from our weakness because we know that all things are possible through him. Everything we experience in our life, if we get the right help, if we sort it out in the right way; we trust and believe that in some way God can bring healing and hope and promise to us. We truly believe that. We believe in transformation. We don't believe in self-help, as meaningful as that may be in some aspects of life; but, we believe that you can actually be changed, we believe that when we come to Christ that we are actually changed, that the old is passed away, that we've taken on new life. That's another beautiful part of 2 Corinthians that calls us this new creation. We believe in transformation. We believe that we can be set free from the things that control us and manipulate us. But here is the point: when you are called from it, it is almost a guarantee that, in some way, you are going to be called back to it.

Here is what I mean. Someone comes to me and they are an alcoholic, and they say, "Jim, I am at a place in my life where I have to have help. I can't do it anymore, I can't figure it out, I can't sort it out. What do I do?" Well, do I think of a person I know in our congregation who has never tasted alcohol and say, "Go and spend some time with that person and let him/her help you." What's that person going to do? Perhaps say, "Just be strong, suck it up, be a man, be a true woman of worth." Someone struggling with an addiction, whether it be a drug addiction or an addiction to pornography—that is destroying our men in ways that we don't want to talk about—an addiction to shopping, an addiction to whatever it is. What do I do? Do I send them to someone I think I know, someone who has never been tempted in any way in their life and tell them that I really think that'd be the right person for them to spend some time with?

When a young mom with children comes to me saying, "You know, I should be happy with my life, I should be blessed; but, for whatever reason, I'm feeling really tempted by the guy I work with or by someone else's husband who really just seems to understand it so much better than my husband does,"—or whatever it is. What do I do? Do I find someone who has never encountered that? Absolutely not. I send the alcoholic to an alcoholic, I send the addict to a recovering addict, a recovering alcoholic. We send those who have

been struggling with all kinds of issues in their life to people who have encountered that same thing, to people who have been there and have found some way to overcome or deal with it—someone who has found a way to understand the power and the grace and the glory that can be lived out even in the midst of that struggle.

The reason we do that is because God calls us from and to our weakness. Because it's those places in my life where I can identify with someone else because I know what it's like to go through that. I know from experience that it's not so easy as everyone saying. I understand it's just not so easy as simply saying, "Just suck it up," or, "If you just read the Bible enough," or, "If you just get your mind on other things." You know where you have struggled and where only by the grace of God have you been able to overcome or to endure in the midst of seeking to ultimately overcome.

If God uses that, if God brings hope into your life, I promise you that, if it's a call from God, he is going to call you to care for others who are in that same place. That's what it is to be "elected." That's what it is to be "called." That's what it is to be "chosen." It's in jars of clay because the suffering for us is not a consequence of our faith, but it's a tool that God uses to keep us in the places where we can help with the suffering of the world.

I went to a funeral yesterday for another young man who had been murdered. Beautiful, powerful, and wonderful words were shared, and there were, perhaps, about 1,000 people all gathered there. In the midst of it as I just looked out—even in the midst of all the power that was being shared, the truth, the love of God, the hope and the promise of God—I was overwhelmingly dejected by the hopelessness I felt as I watched hundreds and hundreds of young people who don't seem to have any hope. I realized that, as much as I want to share hope with them, as much as I'm called to help and to be involved in it in some way, I also realized that, just as much, that help and that hope and that promise need to come in somehow from within.

We need to find people who are not only freed from the slums and the ghettos, but people whom God calls to go back. Not to collect more to go out, but to say that there is something that can redeem not only your life, it can redeem your family, it can redeem your community, it can redeem our community.

There is something that we who live on the other side in so many ways need to be called to understand and to pray and to realize that it's not so easy. For most of us, we don't know, we don't understand, we haven't lived in those experiences. But where is it that in our weakness we can come to realize what we might be able to do, to understand, to welcome, to accept, and in some ways to call.

I had a young man with whom I was in conversation this week. He's a guy in his mid 20's who we baptized not long ago. He's lived a lot of life in that time, and he came to me and he said, "Jim, I overheard you the other day saying something about we need resources for people in our community, we need to be able to have information when you are dealing with depression, or when you are dealing with addiction and when you are dealing with whatever it is, but there is really nothing there. It's all of these groups, and all these organizations, and all of these government funding things. It's all meaningful, but how you get in, it's just so very, very difficult." And he looked at me and he said, "You know, I think I'm called to write that book because I know what it was like to try to get in and not be able to figure it out. I know what it was like to try to go through that and not be able to sort it out."

And I think this is what God wants: He wants to free us, to set us free from those places of our life where we have been controlled by the adversary, where our lives have been manipulated and ultimately will be destroyed. He wants to free us from that not so that we will flee, but so that we will go and find wholeness and be transformed and go back and bring others with us.

To be part of the hope and promise of this world--that's what it is to be sent to the nations. It's not to go off and just have a fun trip, as fun as that is, I promise you. It's not just about being involved and investing our time and caring for those who are less fortunate, as meaningful as that is. And it is meaningful, I promise you. But it is to say, "Where is it that God is calling me from and what is it that he is calling me back to? What is it that I found in the weakness of my life?" There are sins in my life, there are things in my life that have almost destroyed me. As much as I prayed, and prayed, and prayed—just like Paul with that thorn in his side—as much as I prayed, and I prayed, and I prayed, and said, "Lord, remove it.

Remove it. Remove it," at best, he has been able to enable me to deal with it every day."

Is that because God doesn't love me enough? Because I haven't done something right, I haven't prayed the right formula, or I have done something wrong? Absolutely not! It's because God says, "Jim, that's where I want you to serve. I want that weakness in your life to be a reminder for you everyday that without me you are absolutely nothing. But with me, with me, I can show a love to a world that can bring hope and promise."

So what about you? Does God have you? Are you part of the elect? Did God predestine that you were going to come here this morning? If you are, he is stirring within you right now something that he is calling you to do. Someone he is calling you to reach out to. Someone he is saying, "You know, I want you to be vulnerable. I want you to trust that your openness—I know it makes you vulnerable—can be something that I can use for the glory that I want known in this world. I want you to realize that everything you have is in a clay jar."

Where is God calling your from? Where is God calling you to? That's the question for today. This can occupy at least the rest of my day; I hope it does part of yours.