

Ninety or Nine

We sang it this morning as we gathered: “I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together!” That song was written by Richard Avery and Donald Marsh in 1972 and I suspect that Good Shepherd Baptist Church has been singing it almost that long. Does anybody remember when it was introduced here? Like most of Avery and Marsh’s songs, it’s pretty simple, musically-speaking, but that was part of its charm in the music of the 70s Jesus People movement which was largely in reaction to the overly fussy arrangements and bombastic hymnody of the 50s and 60s. We were all busy rejecting the generations before us in the 70s and, yes, I do remember that phenomenon.

But for all its musical simplicity and uncomplicated rhymes, “We Are the Church” has lasted here and in other places because it also reveals some pretty profound truths. The overall theme of the song harkens back to one of the core truths of Christianity. We, those of us gathered together in this time and place, we are the Church. Not only are we and not this building truly the entity known as Good Shepherd Baptist Church but we are also, in microcosm, the current embodiment of the Church with a capital “C.” What happens among us and with us as we interact with the world around us is simply an example of what is happening all over the world, what has happened throughout the last two millennia, of what will happen into the future with those who call on the name of Jesus as Lord. We are the local manifestation of the universal Church of Jesus. And as such, we are also the local manifestation of the Body of Christ.

I bring this concept to the fore today to remind us of something I spoke of last week. As the Body of Christ, the Church universal is now heir to the mission of Jesus: “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” It is a mission meant to carry us until the Lord comes again. As long as there are poor among us, as long as there are captives, as long as there are those physically challenged, as long as there are those who are oppressed, we, the Church, will need to keep working. It is a huge job; too big for the world-wide Church of any age; too big for any one congregation. Yet God calls us to work for the healing of the world, for the building of the Beloved Community, for the coming of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The mission is also, of course, too big for any of us, for any one human, even Jesus. That’s why he surrounded himself with the Twelve and later with the Seventy whom he sent out in his name. That’s why he told his followers to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that (he had commanded them).” Nevertheless, we are all called to do our part. And by all, I really do mean “all.” There are no waivers on this if you are one who proclaims Christ by calling yourself a Christian. It doesn’t matter, as that Avery and Marsh song puts it, if you are “ninety or nine or just a baby.” Each of us is responsible for being part of the Church, part of Good Shepherd Baptist and part of that one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that some of you may have learned to profess faith in as you recited the Nicene Creed. (That’s catholic with a small “c,” by the way, meaning universal). “I am the Church! You are the Church! We are the Church together!”

While I have spoken so far specifically about we who follow Jesus, the calling of God is and has always been on all of those who wish a relationship with the Creator of All, whether they call the

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Holy One Yahweh, Abba, or Allah. Our reading from the Old Testament this morning speaks to the way in which God calls us whether we fit the world's expectations of a suitable ambassador for God or not. When the prophet Jeremiah heard the calling of God upon his life, he tried to demur: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

We don't know exactly how old Jeremiah was when he tried this gambit with God. It's unlikely that he was over twenty, because based on the chronology given in the book of his prophecies he was active in God's service for at least 45 years, most of those in times of war and want. Whatever his actual age, it is clear that he felt unworthy of God's call. I think most of us would find that understandable. As the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews was to write some six hundred years later, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And Jeremiah is hardly the only one of God's servants to try to beg off. Others also made excuses when they are told of God's plans for them. Sarah: "After I have grown old and my husband is old shall I have pleasure?" Moses: "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Gideon: "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." Jonah: "Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." Isaiah: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." Zechariah: "I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years."

Sometimes, when the call of God comes into our lives, as it did for Jeremiah, it reminds us that God is God and we are not. In Jeremiah's memory, God left no doubt about who was in charge: "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..." Sometimes, when the call of God comes into our lives, we feel unprepared, uncertain, out of control. I was reminded in my preparations this week of a concept from the philosophy of the German existentialist, Martin Heidegger, called "thrownness" or "*Geworfenheit*." The term refers to that feeling of being plopped down in the midst of a world that we cannot control and which carries us along willy-nilly. If you are of a certain age, you may remember it from another song of the 70s: "Riders on the Storm" by The Doors. Do you remember the lyrics? "Riders on the storm / Riders on the storm / Into this house we're born / Into this world we're thrown..." I followed this seeming rabbit-trail of thought, by the way, after learning a very simple fact: the name Jeremiah means "the Lord hurls." Jeremiah is literally the man thrown into the world by God.

But Martin Heidegger and The Doors notwithstanding, we who are the people of faith can take solace in our "thrownness." Our path through this world into which we've been thrown, "like an actor out alone," is in fact one known and watched over by our Loving Creator. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," says the Eternal One to Jeremiah and it is a word for all of us. When we feel that the task before us is impossible, that all around us are against us, we can remember God's promise to Jeremiah: "Do not be afraid... for I am with you to deliver you."

I also found a resonance this week between today's Old Testament reading of the call of Jeremiah and the New Testament reading traditionally connected with February 2nd, just yesterday. Some of you may know that in addition to being Groundhog Day, February 2nd is also the Feast of the Presentation or Candlemas. It is, traditionally, the day upon which Christians remember the story recorded in Luke 2:22-36, in which Mary and Joseph take the infant Jesus to the Temple for Mary's purification and the baby's "presentation" as a first born. During their

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time at the Temple, the two new parents were approached by two aged saints, Simeon and Anna. Of Simeon, Luke writes, “this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Luke does not mention Simeon’s age but the assumption is that he is quite old and awaiting death as a natural end. Simeon’s prayer upon seeing the infant is famous: “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Anna, Luke tells us, is 84, or possibly older, depending on how you interpret his text. She, too, is unabashed in her praise of the child, both to his parents and to all in earshot. “(She) began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

So, Saturday’s reading tells the story of two aged servants of God and Sunday’s begins the story of a boy who becomes one of Israel’s best-remembered and longest-serving prophets. It didn’t matter to God if they were “90 or 9 or just a baby.” Nor does our age, education or net worth matter to God now. No matter what we may look like to the world, we are beautiful in God’s eyes. As Isaiah proclaimed and as Pam reminded us this morning with her offertory from the music of Handel, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”” We’ve been reminded of God’s lifelong care for us through the Scriptures and through our music. In a moment, we’ll consider God’s call on our lives in song and then in the great living metaphor of the Lord’s Supper. As we remember how Jesus gave everything he had to bring us into loving relationship with the one he called “Father,” let us pray that God will continue to clarify God’s call to us, whether we are nine or ninety, in the bloom of youth or in the prime of life or in the twilight of our years. For whoever we are, wherever we are on our journey, God continues to call us to work in the Kingdom and God continues to bless us. Thanks be to God!