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GOT BACK ISSUES? JEREMIAH 1:4-10 & Luke 13:10-17

Let us pray: Lord, we ask you that these words that were spoken by Jeremiah so many centuries ago, may speak to us today. Open our ears, open our minds, and open our hearts so we may hear your will for our lives, and that your name may be praised. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.

There is a story that Dr. Ian Paisley, the fiery Irish minister and politician, was preaching one Sunday on the end times, and in particular on the Day of Judgment. As he reached the climax of his address, he said that on the Day of Judgment, "there would be wailing and gnashing of teeth".

At that point an elderly woman put up her hand and said, "Dr. Paisley, I have no teeth." Dr. Paisley replied, "Madam, teeth will be provided." You don't have to worry about a thing on Judgement Day because God will provide including teeth.

But, in order to prepare for that day, God is telling us to get our priorities right. And, don't be afraid to do it. Be expectant and obedient, regardless of the risks. Has your life been full but not fulfilling? Has your life been successful but not significant?

Perhaps your life has been cheered by other people but is not important to God. Perhaps you're restless inside. Maybe God is telling you to do something that is different from what you're doing right now.

Have you ever found yourself thinking about your life, only to say suddenly, "How in the world did I end up here?" Many, maybe even all, of God's faithful saints must have asked themselves this question. For God works in mysterious ways, we say, and we often see the evidence of that in our lives.

At an Indian mission in South Dakota, there are banners hanging up all over the place which say, "The sign of God's presence with you is that your feet are where you did not expect them to be." That sounds about right to me. I have told many people that I had absolutely no desire to become a preacher.

Even when I attended seminary, my professors kept telling me that I should consider preaching and I adamantly said no way. I tried to resist! Like Jeremiah, but I found God was stronger than my resistance. And so, here I am. Standing before you not only preaching but your Pastor.

I still wonder sometimes how I came to be where I am. I know that God has been calling me because my feet are not where I expected them to be. When God called Jeremiah, he, too, was not so eager to stand before the people and preach. He said something like, "Good Lord, I'm only a boy.

I can't speak." He was one among many who hesitated and stalled and resisted. Jeremiah 1:4-10 is a story of how God can use anyone and everyone to do his work in the world. Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet, but he argued that he was not qualified to be a prophet because of his age.

God said that he would tell Jeremiah what to do and what to say, and he did. God also knew that Jeremiah would be persecuted and opposed in his work, but God promised that he would be with Jeremiah and he was. God keeps his promises. When God looks for a leader, he goes after someone who isn't looking for the position.

God does not call the equipped. He equips the called. He calls us and equips us to share the Good News. God has a habit of using folks just like you and me to change the world. Even more amazing is God's patience in calling us, a patience deeply rooted in God's steadfast love. God answers every excuse, every self-serving attempt to exempt ourselves from service.

He equips us to face the consequences of sharing the Good News. He uses our strengths and our weaknesses. He loves us and approves of us. Nothing we do now or in the future can change that. His love for us is genuine. Jeremiah accepted God's plan for his life. Jeremiah was set apart by God for his prophetic work.

He was God's spokesperson. He predicted the doom that Israel would face unless the people repented. God promised through Jeremiah that Israel's suffering would facilitate their redemption. God did not abandon them. Jeremiah's words had the power to lead the Hebrews to actions that produced results and had consequences.

Jeremiah was to pronounce words of judgment and words of mercy and hope. The people of Israel had to endure God's judgement before they could receive God's mercy. But the people of Israel had to obey rules. When we worship God, we do **not** have to follow an ironclad, inflexible set of rules.

The synagogue leader in Luke 13:10-17 was **obsessed** with obeying rules; specifically, the rule about keeping the Sabbath holy. The Jews, especially the Pharisees, were so obsessed with keeping God's Commandments that they came up with all sorts of rules that governed what the people could and could not do on the Sabbath.

Included in the list of things that could not be done on the Sabbath was healing a sick person. Healing was considered work, and a good Jew could not do that type of work. These laws allowed the Pharisees to avoid love's obligations. Jesus argued that people's needs are more important than rules and regulations.

So, going against these rules and regulations, Jesus healed the bent and broken woman on Sabbath Day. The poor bent woman had gotten use to looking at people out of the corner of her eye, by looking up and sideways. After eighteen years, she could hardly remember any other way of seeing the world. On this particular Sabbath, there was a special excitement at the synagogue, where she regularly went to worship.

A Galilean preacher and prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, had arrived in town and would be teaching there. She and the others in town had heard reports about Jesus-how he talked about God's reign arriving soon and how he healed sick people. She was not sure how many of the rumors to believe, but she was trying not to let her hopes up.

Her life already had too many disappointments to count. When she entered the synagogue, the place was abuzz. As Jesus began to teach, however, the room was hushed. Moments later, his words turned from teaching to an invitation. He had caught her eye, "Come here," he said to her. She slowly made her way to the front of the assembly. What happened next amazed the whole congregation.

"Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When this man, Jesus, spoke those words and put his hands on her broken, bent body, she felt power surge through her. Without hesitation, she straightened her once crooked back. She stood tall and praised her God.

The synagogue leader objected to Jesus' freeing the bent woman from her bondage on the Sabbath. In other words, in the mind of the synagogue leader, freeing animals from bondage was more important than freeing people from the bondage of sin and illness.

Let me tell you a story about my late Aunt Bertha. When you sat opposite from Aunt Bert, you didn't notice that there was anything amiss. She was a spry and sparkling 84 years old woman at its best when seated. Nothing was out of place, that is until she stood up. It is then the 84 years seem to drop on her body like a heavy weight, a crushing weight bearing down upon her small, frail body.

Deterioration of the spine, the result of years of degenerative disease had taken its toll and left her bent and broken. As she stood, the sparkle had gone out of her eyes and the breath was drawn without comfortable ease and more with intense labor.

I wish I could have attached a string to her head, like a marionette puppet, and pull her up straight. But her body was rigid, not limp, gripped with pain, bent in agony. Yet, she was an usher without a complaint as she labored to the church door to greet and usher people in and out. As I think about her body and soul and I also think about that bent woman.

How Jesus put his hands on the woman was more astonishing, audacious, admirable, awkward and alarming. She was unclean, unappealing and unattractive, probably uninvited and unadmitted. Jesus removed all prejudicial attitude toward her. Shouldn't we be the same, non-judgmental.

A church had a man in the choir who couldn't sing. Several people hinted to him that he could serve in other places, but he continued to come to the choir. The choir director became desperate and went to the priest. "You've got to get that man out of the choir," he said. "If you don't, I'm going to resign. The choir members are going to quit too. Please do something."

So, the priest went to the man and suggested, "Perhaps you should leave the choir." "Why should I get out of the choir?" he asked. Well, five or six people have told me you can't sing." That's nothing," the man snorted. "Fifty people have told me that you can't preach!"

Do you have a judgmental attitude or a joyous attitude? Dwight L. Moody said that one of the happiest men he ever knew was a man in Dundee, Scotland, who had fallen and broken his back when he was a boy of fifteen. He had lain on his bed for forty years and could not be moved without a good deal of pain.

Probably not a day had passed in all those years without acute suffering. But day after day the grace of God had been granted him, and when Mr. Moody was in his room it seemed as if he was as near heaven as he could get on earth.

When Mr. Moody saw him, he asked him, "Doesn't Satan ever tempt you to doubt God and to think that He is a hard master?" "Oh, yes," he said, "he does try to tempt me. I lie here and see my old schoolmates driving along, and Satan says, 'If God is so good, why has He kept you here all these years? You could have been a rich man, riding in your carriage.'

Then, he said, I see a man, who was young when I was, walk by in perfect health, and Satan whispers, 'If God loved you, couldn't He have kept you from breaking your back?' "And what do you do when Satan tempts you?", said Mr. Moody.

"Ah, I just take Satan to Calvary, and I show him Christ, and I point out those wounds in His hands and feet and side, and say, 'I know He loves

me.' Satan got such a scare seeing there nineteen hundred years ago that he cannot stand it; and he leaves me every time."

We must remember that there are many more blessings than liabilities and risks. Having called us, God will not fail to provide all we need.

God created us to be disciples, just as God created Mozart to write music. Can you imagine yourself doing anything else? God created us. God calls us. God provides all that we need to answer that calling and fulfill our purpose.

God, in Christ Jesus, takes on the full weight of our sin and experiences our "bent-ness on the cross. What joy is found by not having back issues. We can be honest about the bondage that enslaves us. We are free to welcome the Christ who comes, sees us, like the woman, weighted down, and bid us to come and be made whole.

And every now and then, God gives us a glimpse of how God has been present with us, when we suddenly realize how our feet are not at all where we expected them to be. If you have back issues, God will certainly take care of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, thank you for being there when we are bent over by our doubts and questions, yet once more, you reach out to touch us with your hope and grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.