

Epiphany 4C
January 31, 2010
Hymns: 556 - 281 - 395 - 280 v5,6

JEREMIAH 1:4-10 (slide 1 during reading of text)
BE MOTIVATED FOR A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIFE!

(powerpoint parts only as they appear in sermon!)

***Maintain A Strong Consciousness of God's Presence Day By Day.**

***Always Remember That You Have Been Set Apart For God And His Work.**

***Then Live A Purpose-Driven Life As God's "Prophet."**

**Let the world despise and leave me. They have left my Savior too.
Human hearts and looks deceive me. You are not like them, untrue.
And since You have smiled upon me, God of wisdom, love and might....
Foes may hate and friends may shun me – Show Your face, and all is bright! Amen! CW 465, v2**

Dear Fellow Christians, who have come into God's presence this morning in worship - knowing that you have been set apart to be His witnesses in the world,

Sometimes I think we make it too easy to join the church. We've set the bar too low. Anybody can get in. Even sinners--like you . . . and me. Suppose we required people to walk on hot coals as an initiation into the church? Maybe people would take church membership more seriously. Earlier this decade Burger King and Kentucky Fried Chicken both got themselves in "hot water," when their marketing departments sponsored team building retreats at which employees were asked to do just that. In walking across eight feet of burning coals while co-workers cheered, employees of both companies suffered first and second degree burns, some requiring days of hospitalization. I have a feeling that churches wouldn't grow quite as fast if we required prospective members to walk barefoot across an eight-foot bed of live coals. Do you think they would grow in faith and be assimilated faster? Who knows? My point is - anything that comes too cheaply isn't appreciated.

I mention fire-walking in order to deal with a bigger subject. What does it take to motivate people? Millions of dollars worth of motivational books, tapes and seminars have wrestled with this question. If you have the answer, it will make you rich. A more pressing question for many of us is, how can I motivate myself to do the things I know I ought to do? Can anyone relate to this question? Self motivation is just as tricky as motivating others. That's why they have a self-help section in book stores.

This morning we want to deal with a young man in the Old Testament who was very highly motivated. His name was Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet . . . not a bullfrog . . . as some might think from that Three Dog Night tune in the 70s. Jeremiah was a prophet who was only a teenager when God came to him and told him to prophesy. "I do not know how to speak," Jeremiah protested, "for I am only a youth." But God assured Jeremiah that He would put His own words into Jeremiah's mouth and make him a "prophet to the nations." Jeremiah didn't walk on a bed of live coals, but he was still a powerful communicator. And he enlivened his presentations with actions such as wearing a heavy yoke around his neck as a sign of what would happen to Israel if it did not return to God.

But things did not go well for Jeremiah. Indeed he is known as "the broken-hearted prophet" because the dear people of Israel he loved rejected his prophecies and ridiculed him. He was taunted, put in jail, and at one point thrown in a pit to die. Sometimes Jeremiah became quite bitter. He expresses the anger and frustration he feels in his writings. Some believe Jeremiah was murdered in Egypt by those angered by his prophecies. Still, up until the time of his death, he persisted in doing what God wanted him do.

Here's what's interesting. Jeremiah's prophecies proved to be correct, but that was little consolation to him and it did not endear him to his critics. No prophet wants to tell his people that they are going to suffer and then be proven correct. That is no way to win friends and influence people. It's much more profitable to preach a prosperity Gospel and tell people that God wants to bless them in every way including making them rich. But that was not the message that God laid on Jeremiah's heart.

Jeremiah was true to his mission. Today he is recognized as one of Israel's great prophets, one of the most authentic messengers of God who has ever lived. What kept him going when his work was not rewarded with the kind of acclaim he expected? This is important because some of us go about our daily responsibilities--raising our families, working at our jobs, serving in the community, serving at Brooklyn Lutheran Church--and we don't feel rewarded either. Life is difficult and the very people we look to for support may be completely unappreciative. Where do we find the motivation to keep going, to keep striving, to keep serving,

to be all God has called us to be?

Jeremiah had a strong consciousness of God in his life. Listen to the words from our lesson for the day, *“The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.’”* Jeremiah had a strong consciousness of God in his life. I believe most people have a consciousness of God, though generally it is not as refined as that of Jeremiah.

Back when George W. Bush was Vice President of our country, he represented the U.S. at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Bush was deeply moved by something that Brezhnev’s widow did at that funeral. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid to close it, Brezhnev’s wife reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband’s chest. Fifty years of atheistic communism had not extinguished the flame of hope that cross represents, even for the widow of the man who led the most powerful ever Christian persecuting communist regime!

Most people have a consciousness of God. Some work hard at ignoring that consciousness. After all, if we admit God exists, we might have to plan our lives accordingly. Some are conscious of God only to the point that we know we ought to live better. **(slide 2)** Jeremiah had a super-consciousness of God’s presence in his life. Do you have a strong consciousness of God’s presence in your life? Do you pray several times a day – I mean really pray!? Are you in communion with God allowing Him to speak to your heart through daily Meditation? Are your decisions in life – great and small made with a consciousness not only that God is watching, but that you want to please Him? If you were answer “yes” to all these question, I would have to call you a liar. This humble pastor knows that he also, way too often goes way too long in a day (or days) without maintaining a consciousness of God’s presence.

May we be more like Jeremiah! Even if - people simply would not listen to his message. They didn’t want anything to interrupt their comfort and convenience. When, at the urging of God, Jeremiah proclaimed, “Look guys, we have a problem,” they taunted him, ridiculed him, persecuted him. A lesser man would have folded his cards and gone home. But Jeremiah had a strong consciousness that God was with him.

Jeremiah knew that he had been “set apart.” Listen again to his words in our lesson for today: *“The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart . . .’* What does that mean, “set apart”? Have you ever heard the phrase, “He marches to a different drummer”? Often this term is used derisively. It means that someone is out of step with the rest of society. We are a very conformist society. No one wants to be thought of as “different.” We want to make sure if wide ties are in style, that we wear a wide tie. If narrow ties are in style, we wear a narrow tie. If no tie is in style, we wouldn’t be caught dead wearing one. Usually this is a rather harmless game we play, but sometimes it can get us in trouble.

Remember when you said to your mother, “But everybody’s doing it”? and your mother said, “If everyone was jumping off a cliff, would you jump off one, too?” The crowd can be wrong. The crowd was wrong in Jeremiah’s time. They wanted to worship idols and ignore their responsibilities to God. God set apart Jeremiah to confront the crowd. May I say to you that we are also becoming a society that is moving away from God? Sure, there are many great churches in our land and millions of people still make their way to those churches each year. But each year, believers are a smaller percentage of society than the year before. And our society is becoming basically hostile to many Christian values. **(slide 3)** God is looking for people who are willing to be “set apart”--not a smug, self-righteous type of set apart. God has had enough of religious people who look down on the rest of society. God is looking for a different type of “set apart” people-- people with a servant mentality who want to influence society for sake of Christ’s name and for the eternal salvation of souls. Jeremiah had a very strong consciousness of God. Jeremiah knew that he had been set apart.

We have a member of this congregation who has that mentality. She has a grandson about whom she is very concerned for his spiritual welfare. She has expressed the same to him and passed on to him the Meditation books from our synod that we distribute. This young man has been living with his girl friend. (That was one of his grandma’s concerns. She knows the ongoing living unrepentant in that state leads directly to hell.) Well, the young man has changed his ways! I wish I could say he was coming to our church instead of another – not to gain his number as much as to have his witness to our membership! He is attending church, he has moved back home with his father, and he is searching diligently for a job through which he can marry and support a bride and her child he has come to dearly love. Wow! That’s quite a story! That a grandma set apart from the world, and pulling others out like burning sticks from a fire!

Thirdly, **Jeremiah lived a purpose-driven life.** Pastor Rick Warren wrote a best-selling book with that title. Some of us participated in a Bible Class in which we studied Warren's book. Do you remember how he begins that book? The first words are, "It's not about you." Jeremiah knew that it wasn't about him. God had work for him to do, dirty work, unrewarding work, but because God had called him to the task, Jeremiah did what needed to be done. God is looking for people willing to do what needs to be done today.

(slide 4) You and I don't live under those extreme conditions. Most of us will never really suffer for our faith. Most of us will never even be socially ostracized like Jeremiah. But many of us are in situations in which we are not appreciated, even though we are doing the best we can. Some of us are caring for aging parents, some for special needs children. Some of us are working against great odds to make our community a better community or our church a better church. We know we are not prophets, but we do have a strong consciousness of God in our lives. We do believe that we have been set apart to make a difference. Our lives are driven by a purpose, to be all God created us to be.

This is the season of Epiphany, when our focus is on Jesus of Nazareth being both true God and Savior of the world. What an understatement it would be to say that Jesus had a purpose-driven life! His desire that all men be saved understandably would include the people of His own home town. And so, as we had in Gospel lesson for today, Jesus did not shun away from witnessing to them, even when they would reject Him and try to kill Him! Ultimately, Jesus would be put to death by those He loved and had come to save. No we can't match that effort of Jesus! No, we probably fall far short of meeting the purpose-driven life that drove Jeremiah. But we will let many people around us go to hell forever, just so our lives can be more comfortable around them?! Where is the love in that for a family member? For a work, school, or social acquaintance? Isn't that being very selfish? What is the purpose of failing to be a prophet speaking God's Word to others when the situation calls for it? Are we forgetting that we have been set apart for that very activity? Do block out of our minds that God is present, noting our witness...or denial of Him by our silence?

We need to know that God sees our efforts. Those efforts are not in vain anymore than Jeremiah's efforts were in vain. Hang in there, friend. You won't have a book in the Bible named after you, but your name has been written in the Lamb's Book of Life! Like Jeremiah, before you were ever born, God set you apart for His service! Hang in there! God will not let you down! Amen!

**Ashamed of Jesus? Yes, I may when I've no guilt to wash away,
No tear to wipe, no good to crave, No fear to quell, no soul to save.**

**Till then – nor is my boasting vain – Till then I boast a Savior slain!
And oh, may this my glory be: That Christ is not ashamed of me! Amen (CW 347 v4, 5)**