

“Ready to Follow God’s Lead”

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Jeremiah 1:1-2, 4-8

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵ “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.”

⁶ Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” ⁷ 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. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

Luke 4:1-2

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

When Janet was seven years old she thought she’d be a nurse. Two of her aunts were nurses and that seemed like a fine thing. When she was twelve, she decided to be a teacher. She was good at helping others understand how to do what the teacher asked. By the time she was seventeen and getting ready for college, she wasn’t sure about her career choice. But she didn’t want to disappoint anyone, so she got a teaching degree. In all those years, Janet didn’t once ask God what direction she should go. And she doesn’t remember anyone ever suggesting that she might.

The bible doesn’t say that Jeremiah or Jesus asked either though, so maybe asking isn’t the most important thing. God got Jeremiah’s attention and told him, “You’re going to be my prophet. I’ll put my word into your mouth and you will tell the people.” (That’s what “prophet” means in the bible.) “Now, no excuses. This is what you were born to do. Don’t worry. I’ll be with you.”

From what we read God didn’t say anything to Jesus. He was baptized, then God as Spirit led him into the wilderness. And there, he fasted. Individuals, churches, or even nations fast for different reasons, but one big reason is to seek clarity. When people are trying to discern God’s way for them, fasting can be a real help. Fasting and prayer are often mentioned together. When we’re trying to know what God hopes for us, it’s a good pairing. We fast – which removes certain distractions – and we’re able to focus better on listening for God.

People used to fast much more than we do today. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, fasted every Friday, and for much of his life twice a week. Our bishop, Hee Su Jung, and the cabinet regularly fast when they’re working on appointments. What church, what pastor would be most fruitful together, which pairing would draw out the best from both sides and lead to further discipleship and ministry.

We can trust that Jesus prayed as he fasted. An advantage of the wilderness is that he was also removed from the many distractions that come with being around people. Forty days. We don’t

know how much of the time Jesus spent listening, how long he waited before he heard from God – maybe it was right away, maybe not. But we know Jesus was present and available.

Today is our third of three sermons on biblical “40 day” stories. I’d like us to consider our readiness to follow God’s lead.

Both of our texts speak of a person taking on God’s plan for their lives. Jeremiah was still a child. Jesus... we don’t actually know that this was his first career. Books have been written about the possibility. Did he spend years as a carpenter like Joseph before him? Was he apprenticed to another trade? Did he travel? Maybe Jesus had a full life before he heard about John baptizing people in the Jordan River.

By the time Janet was 30, she was wondering again about her life. A stay-at-home mom who did some day work, she wasn’t exactly dissatisfied but she felt like something was missing in her life. So she started paying more attention. She’d been active in church growing up and now she started getting active again. Maybe that helped, because she began to feel... like she was supposed to be preparing herself for something, only she didn’t know what. She went to talk with her pastor.

Janet’s journey took years, but gradually her life has grown to be more like what she believes God intends for her. She’s not there yet, not fully the person God intends her to be, but she’s on her way.

Life decisions are the choices we make again and again. Probably, the little ones that we think don’t matter are the most important. Through our years, we have many opportunities to choose our life’s path. Like Robert Frost wrote, “I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

I chose to begin my time at First Church with a sermon series on 40 Days because after 11 years with Pastor Jerry, you were in transition as much as I was. Yet as I studied the topic, I realized not only that many of us are dealing with life changes at any given time but also that 40 Days isn’t just about transition. Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness was about accepting God’s plan and preparing himself for his role and the task ahead.

It was a time when the only one he could lean on was God. Only after these 40 days of putting his trust in God alone did he face the challenges that were to come. First were those three temptations: “Since you are God’s Son, command this stone to become bread.” And “Worship anything but God and the world will be yours.” And “Since God’s angels protect you, throw yourself down from here. They’ll take care of you.”

Jesus was able to face those temptations, and he was able to face all the challenges that came to him during his ministry, in part because of those 40 days with God.

Okay, I’ve taken the 40 Day metaphor about as far as I can. The last piece of this message is about our own readiness to follow God’s lead. When we look at Jeremiah’s and Jesus’ stories, an important first step is to listen and pay attention. If Jesus hadn’t been paying attention, the Spirit would have never been able to lead him into the wilderness.

How much of your prayer time is spent talking – aloud or silently – and how much is spent in quiet listening? Mark Twain famously wrote that God gave us two ears and one mouth so we’d spend twice as much time listening.

A second step is to dismantle our resistance to what God wants for us. Jeremiah said, “I’m only a

child!” Moses said, “I don’t speak well.” Only rarely does a person respond to God’s direction by saying, “Oo, pick me, pick me!” Mostly, we say, “But—!” or in my case, when I realized God was leading me into pastoral ministry, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Maybe we need some motivation. Remember when Hank Williams, Jr. used to sing before Monday night football (I don’t know, maybe he still does) “Are you ready? Are you ready?”

Yes, you already have a job, or you’re retired. Wait, you say, you’re not looking to start something new with your life. I won’t say relax, but most people who go deeper into their commitment with God aren’t called to live entirely new lives. For most people, it’s more of a rededication of what we do, how we do it, and why we do it.

Let’s say you agree to work the 5 a.m. clean up shift at the fairgrounds. Great! We need that. Do you do it because it needs to be done? Or because your friends bugged into do it? Or do you do this as a gift to God? Imagine:

“Here I am, God, enjoying the birdsong and the dewy grass as I clean up the messes people left last night. This is part of my gift. You have given me so much – my health, this beautiful morning, the coffee I drank. This is just part of my way of saying, thanks.” When you do this, trash-picking becomes a spiritual practice. It’s part of your weekly offering that you can remember and smile about when the plates are passed on Sunday.

What about, if you’re listening for divine guidance, God as Spirit tells you not to do the trash pickup this year, because what God knows (and you don’t) is that some other person is ready to step in and help. But they’ll give up if all the slots are taken, so you do something else this year.

In the first instance, this person is doing something ordinary, doing what they always do, but now it’s dedicated to God. In the second instance, they’re attuned to the Spirit’s workings and are being led – just like Jesus was led by the Spirit – to do something different.

One part of recognizing that God is God and we’re not, is accepting that we do not know the full story. We don’t see the complete picture. God asks us to trust. And to say, yes. God will take it from there. And when we step out and follow God’s lead – whether it’s something new or something we’ve done forever – we find that God is with us each step of the way. God will be our confidante, our encourager, and our comfort.

We make our life’s path by walking on it. Each day we have the chance to grow closer to God’s intended path for us, or further, just by the simple choices we make. Is God your constant companion or a visitor you occasionally walk with? The choice is always yours.

Maybe today would be a good day to say again – or for the first time – “My life is yours, God.”

Would you join me in the “Wesley Covenant Prayer”?

I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you, or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.