Jeremiah 1:4-10

**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.”

**9**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.

**10**

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.

Jeremiah was my father's favourite prophet. "He was like me, a bit of a crybaby" my father would say. His younger sister would agree with that unflattering self-assessment. (As younger sisters will). Actually as I struggled to write this sermon I finally had to admit that I am hearing my father’s voice ringing in my ears and in my heart and if you hear him too, that’s ok.

The poetry of the call of Jeremiah's catches our imagination. Yes, it is a particular word spoken to a particular person at a particular time in history and a particular place in the world. In this case a call to prophetic ministry spoken to the son of a priestly family from Anathoth north of Jerusalem. The call on the life of Jeremiah will be to speak God's word of judgment to the House of David for what the theologian Walter Brueggemann calls its "ostentatious, self-indulgent trajectory of economic-military autonomy on which Solomon had set it." This call sends Jeremiah on a multinational odyssey to speak out against evil and greed to denounce the wrong done by kings and rulers, to announce unwelcome news to a people he loved to whom he would so much rather have spoken words of comfort. In the call of the prophet Jeremiah we hear the cinematic God of the big booming voice who calls forth earth-shaking things. So we, listening in from the distance of miles and centuries, hear the word spoken to Jeremiah; we hear the stories of his prophecy and the consequences of his action and the inaction of those to whom he was sent, we read the poetry, we shelve the book with a shrug and say "Great. Glad that wasn't addressed to me!"

When I was young (aeons ago) I had one of those children's books of saints. I think the idea was that the examples of the saintly lives were meant to encourage us to live lives of goodness on our way to sainthood. Of course the saints these books described never swore when they stubbed their toes, never had a bad hair day or a major zit before an important date. These books described the lives of saints after the editor had been through with an airbrush, editing out every human failing, every moment of doubt, every wrong turn or unrighteous action. Rather than encourage me to apply myself to virtuous living these stories made me throw up my hands: I will never be perfect so why bother to try. It's like the shrug with which we may meet Jeremiah, I am not courageous, if you are like me you might add I am no longer young. God is unlikely to send me on an earth-changing journey. I have no vocation. God and the world have no real need of me.

Maybe there is no great word spoken to us in a booming voice. Perhaps there is no earth-shattering nation-changing vocation to which we are called. But there is a word whispered to us:

" Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

And before you were born, I consecrated you..."

What would it mean for our lives if we listened to that whispered word and heard that it was addressed to each and to all of us.

In the church a vocation has come to be shorthand for a vocation to Holy orders, a calling to ordained or professed ministry. So one is understood to have a vocation to the priesthood or the diaconate or one is called to become a nun or a monk. And consecration is understood to mean making things Holy where holiness is a sort of mist that infuses people and things. But vocation is not limited to religious life. Your vocation may not be sanctioned by the church or any religious authority. In fact your vocation may put you on a collision course with the church or religious authorities... (says she, speaking with the voice of experience). Holy just means set apart. Most usually set apart for a special purpose. And if God language is hallenging then think of your vocation using the definition offered by one of my seminary professors: where your joy meets the world's need.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you

And before you were born, I consecrated you

As a Christian, a person of faith, and a person of the Book I cannot see anyone as an accidental aglomoration of cells. And so I hear this word spoken to Jeremiah as a word of intentionality addressed to each of us. God created each of us with us in mind. God is generous, extravagant even, but God is not wasteful. There is no throwaway creature in the imagination of God. Each of us is created on purpose with a purpose. Each of us is an essential part of God's creative vision. Our joy is at the centre of that creative vision. Not our happiness that dangles on dependent threads that are easily snipped by misfortune or grief but our joy. The joy that springs forth from the knowledge that we are created by love for love. Yes, the place where our joy meets the world's need may be in ordained ministry but the church is not the only place to which a person may be called. And the place of your vocation may not be your workplace. We have all met people who are living their vocations, they may be doctors or dancers, they could be teachers or tour-guides or actors, activists, painters, or pianists, they may be construction workers or contemplatives. They may be people with no discernible job but to be in the world challenging the rest of us to put feet on our faith. These are the people who demand that we hear

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you...

And hear it not only as a word spoken to our comfort, our privilege, the places of our pride but to hear it also as a word of challenge spoken to us.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you...

And what if we, looking at one another saw in each other the intentionality in the mind of God. What would we dare to say about ability and disability? Could we look at the wild and wonderful variety of who we are dare to rank by race or age or gender or height or health or sexual orientation or wealth or any other metric we have used to weigh our worth on a sale of our own devising? What if we took seriously that each person is not a failed attempt at creating a clone of what we value. Each person is a masterpiece from the mind of God. A creation of infinite worth and particular purpose.

Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you...