

## Go Where I Send Thee

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 59:9-12,16-17; Acts 16:1-10

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The people in the stories of today could not be more different in their background, in their preparation, and in their environment.

Jeremiah was a youth who was called by God to become a prophet to the people of Israel. The nation of Israel had strayed so far away from a life that reflected the worship of Yahweh that they now worshiped the idols of Baal, including burning their children as offerings. The son of Hilkiah, a Jewish priest who was faithful to God, Jeremiah had some idea about what he was being asked to do.

He resisted, complaining that he was only a child and did not know how to speak. But God was persistent. God would place God's words in his mouth. God said to Jeremiah, "Get yourself ready." After a time of study and preparation, Jeremiah began preaching. This would evolve into prophecy against the worship practices of the people. During his life Jeremiah would be beaten, thrown in jail, placed in stocks in the town Gate, and rescued from a pit of mud where he had been thrown to starve.

The Word of God through Jeremiah came true and the nation of Israel was carried into captivity into Babylon. The Babylonian ruler treated Jeremiah kindly, allowing him to stay in Israel and choose where he wanted to live. He would eventually go to Egypt where he spent the remainder of his life. Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet." The people of Israel would not listen to the message of God that he prophesied.

To many of us the story of Paul is a familiar one, or at least parts of the story you have often heard repeated. Paul was a man whose experience with God and with the Christ could only be described as extraordinary. It was an amazing encounter as he made his way to persecute followers of that same Christ. That encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus would dominate and direct the rest of his life. After a time of study and preparation for his calling as a missionary to the Gentile world he would do nothing else for the remainder of his life.

There is one other person who was briefly mentioned in the reading this morning. Timothy was another one of those young men whom God had singled out to travel with Paul. Timothy was a young man, not yet married, still living at home. His mother was Jewish; his father was Greek.

He would have been fluent in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Looking ahead, could anyone have been a better partner for Paul when God led them to Greece?

Like Jeremiah, Paul would have not lived an easy life in following God's plan for him. Paul would be persecuted. Paul would be beaten. Paul would be imprisoned. Only death would extinguish his passion for being the person and doing the mission to which he had been sent.

As you listened to the reading of the scripture this morning, couldn't you almost feel the frustration, the angst, of Paul? He is trying so hard to be and to do what he feels called to do. Waiting on the Lord to use those gifts and that call that has been given to you through the Holy Spirit can be difficult.

We, in our culture, understand that well. Our lives are filled with:

- instant gratifications - that microwave meal;
- seven-minute sound bites and then a commercial;
- one minute at the stop light can seem like forever;
- deadlines that come all too quickly.

Paul wanted to enter, literally, the entire world with the Gospel. However, the circumstances, whatever the reasons, Paul was prevented from going where he was trying to go. He cannot travel into Asia. And then came the direction from God, spoken through a dream, "Come over to Macedonia and help us.

- Macedonia is ready to hear the Gospel.
- Macedonia is waiting for you, Paul.
- The message of the Gospel will bear fruit in Macedonia.
- The country of Greece will become a Christian country because of you, Paul.

Paul has spent all of his life getting ready to go to Greece. He doesn't know it yet, but it will become evident when he begins his new assignment.

- Paul was a Jew among Jews.
- Both his mother and father were Jews.
- But Paul's birthplace was in south-central Turkey, not in Israel.
- Paul had experienced other cultures.
- Paul had studied under Gamaliel, the best of the best Rabbinic teachers.
- Gamaliel required his students to learn the Greek language and study the Greek poets.

God was sending Paul where he could be most effective in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul could speak both the classical Greek and what is called the "street language." He knows all of the Greek mythology and he will use it to teach the people about Jesus.

Today, throughout Greece there is no other person, other than Jesus, who is more revered, more loved.

I think that I am not doing God an injustice to imagine God saying to all of these people, "Go where I send thee. Go, and I will bless your ministry beyond description."

Fast-forward in history to the colonies of America. The slave trade was a lucrative business. Africans were purchased as property to do the work in households and in the fields.

One of those slaves was George Lisle. Born a slave in Virginia in 1752, Lisle's family was taken to Georgia. His parents are recorded as the only Christian family among the slaves on Sharp's plantation. As Christians they regularly attended, along with the white folk, the worship services on Sunday.

As an adult, about 1774, he was led to become a Christian by the Rev. Matthew Moore, the pastor of the Buckhead Creek Baptist Church where Lisle's master, Henry Sharp was a deacon.

Lisle would later write, "... I full well recollect, I requested of my Lord and Master to give me a work, I did not care how mean (how small) it was, only to try and see how good I would do it."

Lisle continued to worship in the white church for about four years. It became evident to both the Pastor and Sharp that Lisle was called to preach. They encouraged him to preach to the other slaves. He was considered such a powerful preacher that he not only preached to the slaves but was invited to preach in predominately white congregations as well.

He became the first African Baptist pastor of the first black church in America, the Silver Bluff church on the Gaulphin Plantation in South Carolina. He was the first African American to be ordained in America.

Before the American Revolution Lisle and his family were freed by Sharp and encouraged to pursue his calling as a preacher.

When Sharp moved his family to Savannah at the beginning of the American Revolution, Lisle and his family went with him and Lisle continued his work there, organizing an African Baptist church.

When Sharp died in 1778, his children tried to again enslave Lisle and his family as part of their inheritance. He was imprisoned and released only when he was able to produce his freedom papers. His only hope for continued freedom from pursuit by the Sharp family was to be evacuated with other loyalists from America to Jamaica.

To finance the trip to Jamaica for himself, his wife, and his four children, he obtained a loan from the British Colonel Kirkland and accepted the status of indentured servant to pay for his passage by ship. Landing in Jamaica in 1783, he repaid the debt of \$700 after working for the Jamaican government for two years.

He then secured permission to preach to the slaves on the island. He preached at the racecourse in Kingston. The novelty of a black itinerate ex-slave preacher attracted many to come and hear his rousing message. He was soon able to gather a congregation together and purchase a piece of land about a mile from Kingston where he gradually built a chapel.

Lisle knew that if the work was to be successful he must have others who could preach and teach. Others, along with financial aid, did come from American and from Britain.

The work was not easy and he was jailed more than once because of charges brought against him falsely. He was placed in chains and his family was unable to visit him. At times he was officially banned from preaching on the charge that Africans were "pretend preaching, teaching and expounding the word of God...by uneducated, illiterate and ignorant persons and false enthusiasts."

As the mission became more successful there began to be fierce opposition from the planters who had great influence in the Jamaican House of Assembly. They were Anglican and they opposed both the education and the congregational governance ideas of the Baptists from being introduced to their slaves.

Lisle was wise with the wisdom of God. He constructed a church covenant which

- instructed the church members about commonly shared principles from the Scriptures.
- gave comfort to the slaveholders, ensuring that their slaves would be law abiding.

The members of the legislature, the magistrates and the justices approved, and slaves were given permission to become members of the church. As a visionary leader Lisle, and those who worked alongside of him, continued to enable their African brothers and sisters to receive the truth of the Gospel for themselves.

George Lisle died before the slaves of Jamaica were freed, but at his death there were more than 20,000 Christian slaves who had become a part of the Baptist church.

The people in the stories today could not be more different in their background, in their preparation, in their environment, in every way that one can imagine – except one -- they went where God sent them.

If all of us possessed the same spiritual gifts and the same calling, it would be a strange world indeed. But all who are Christians are called to some kind of ministry.

Will it always be easy? Will we always be popular? NO.

Might we have to sacrifice something? YES.

Into what ministry in the life of the Church is Jesus asking you to walk?

May your answer be, "Here I am Lord, send me."

Amen.