

POSTCARD FROM A PROPHET

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

A couple of weeks ago, the postman delivered an envelope to the church. The envelope was hand-addressed in a large, shaky script to Pastor at First Presbyterian Church. The return address was in California. In this envelope was a typed letter and a postcard. The postcard was clearly old and on the front was a color photograph of this church. The building addition is not present so it is definitely pre-1960 although the card is much older than that.

So, what did the letter say? Well, let me read it to you.

Good morning:

I hope this letter brightens your day. I was at an antique store here and found this old circa 1930 picture card of your beautiful church.

It's an old time classic for sure so I said to myself, "By golly, I think I'll send it home where it can be appreciated." Our heritage is important to us all and should be preserved. Lots of changes, I suppose. Enlarged and posted up it will cause some nice conversation.

Well, I gave \$6 for it so if you want it for \$7 or \$8 or so why that's sure ok. Throw in a little postage if you want.

My wife used to laugh at me and say, "If you hear from them you'll have to take me out to lunch." I will be ninety-one years old this coming June 26th and I'm still going strong as far as I know.

I like to call my little hobby a "re-distribution of happiness." Our world sure needs it.

Thank you, Godspeed, and a great New Year to you and your congregation,

Lowell Joerg
Brookdale Assisted Living, Stockton, California

I have to admit, my first inclination was that this letter was a scam. We get a lot of weird things at the church, a lot of questionable requests for money, which can make one a little cynical. But after a moment's consideration, I realized that if this were a scam, it was an exceptionally poor one. The man had already sent us the product—the postcard. I've purchased old postcards on eBay and the average price is about \$5 to \$7 dollars. And he did send us a very nice postcard.

So, the next thing I did was to conduct an internet search to see what I could learn. I typed in the man's name—'Lowell Joerg' and I added 'postcard.' I hit enter, and the internet blew up. I had stumbled onto Lowell Joerg—The Postcard Man.

I discovered dozens of newspaper articles from all over the country about Mr. Joerg's postcards. For example, an article from Elyria, Ohio, tells of a postcard of the county courthouse sent by Mr. Joerg. The envelope had been addressed to "Judge." At the courthouse, the envelope was delivered to the presiding judge who just happened to have an existing collection of postcards of that courthouse. Articles have been written in Cadillac, Michigan, Kokomo, Indiana, Gaylord, Michigan, Watertown, New York, Hudson, Wisconsin, and many other places.

The newspaper articles all say basically the same thing about how the postcard arrived in the mail addressed to Judge or Principal or whatever. The articles all quote the accompanying letter and I could see that Mr. Joerg has one form letter that he personalizes. Every letter has the "By golly" and the reminder that he would welcome a few dollars back. At some point it is clear that his wife has died because he begins to refer to her in the past tense.

In 2015, a local reporter in the town in California where Mr. Joerg lives interviewed him about his hobby. His career was in insurance and his hobby was stamp collecting. But he soon discovered that the postcards were more interesting than the stamps. Today, he likes to comb through antique and junk stores looking for postcards and has been mailing the cards out for thirty years. He says only about 25% of the cards get a response. When the reporter asked him why he does this, he said, "It makes people happy. What else can I do? I'm 87. The world sure needs it." And he's right. The world does need it.

So, what did I do? I responded. First, I took the postcard and grabbed a camera and walked across the street to find the location where the original photo was taken. And I took a picture. I scanned the postcard and printed the old and new photos side-by-side. I mailed this to Mr. Joerg along with a letter of appreciation. And I included \$20 for the Postcard Man to continue his work.

Our reading for today is something of a postcard from the past. We are reading from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was born in Israel in the late 6th century, about 25 years before the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. After the Exile of 587 BC when many of the Jews were carried away to Babylon, Jeremiah chose to remain in Jerusalem to help the people rebuild their lives. He preached a message of hope over judgment, and he helped lead the people to a new understanding of their relationship with God. At some point, for his own personal safety, he was forced to flee to Egypt. Shortly after that, he disappears from history.

Today's reading focuses on Jeremiah's call from God to be a prophet. Jeremiah is a young man when this takes place. He writes that God's word came to him saying,

*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.*

In other words, God had ordained that Jeremiah was to be a prophet before he had been conceived. However, like so many others, Jeremiah resists God's call saying, *I am only a boy; I do not know how to speak.* These words remind us of the objections Moses makes when God calls him from the burning bush. Moses says, *O holy Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant: But I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.* God says to Jeremiah the same thing God says to Moses, *Do not be afraid. I am with you.* God tells Jeremiah, *Do not say, I am only a boy. You will go to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.* And then the Lord does something that we also see with other prophets, God touches the mouth of Jeremiah and tells him, *Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

The job of the prophet is to speak the word of God to the world, to speak truth, to speak judgment, to speak hope. The job of the prophet is not to tell people what they want to hear, or to say what is popular; the job of the prophet is to speak the word of God. The prophet may find themselves like Elijah, standing all alone with the word. But it must be spoken.

We are told that God touches Jeremiah's mouth. Don't think for a moment that this is a gentle touch. It is not. In the book of Job you will recall that Satan challenges God to test Job's faithfulness by taking away everything that Job has in order to see if he will curse God. God sends a wind to the house where Job's family is eating. The wind strikes the house flattening it and killing everyone inside. The verb 'strike' is the same word used to describe God touching Jeremiah's mouth. God did not caress Jeremiah's mouth to gently impart to him God's word. God smacks him. One doesn't receive the word of God and walk away whistling. The unfiltered word can sting.

Armed with God's word, Jeremiah is empowered to do God's work. God tells him, *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.* It is difficult to grasp the magnitude of this responsibility that God places on Jeremiah. God appoints him over kings and presidents to do God's work. God gives Jeremiah the power to both create and destroy, to build and to pull down, to plant and to pluck up, to overthrow if necessary. That is his power. Jeremiah will use this power to confront kings, to turn the people back toward God, to bring hope to the broken, to be God's prophet.

Today and next Sunday, we will install the newest classes of officers for this church—those who have been called by you and by God to serve as deacons and elders. In these offices they have duties—to lead and to serve, to represent God’s word and God’s will. With these offices comes God’s power, but they also need our power—our support, and our prayers.

Last Sunday, I preached from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. In that passage Paul talks about the different gifts given to Christians. As the whole body of Christ we each serve different functions. God has made us prophets and apostles, teachers, healers, preachers, those who serve, those who lead, those who make desserts, and more. Each calling and each gift is important to the whole body.

Lowell Joerg, the Postcard Man, writes in his letters that he calls his hobby a “re-distribution of happiness.” When I wrote him back, I told him that in the church we view what he does as a ministry—sharing happiness. And it is. Maybe he’s found his calling, sending out old postcards; he sends them in faith where they will make someone smile. It certainly worked for me. As gifts go, it’s a small one. But as Paul argued, it is as valued as the greatest evangelist. And, honestly, no evangelist has made me smile as much as I did when I received that postcard in the mail.

Jeremiah was truly one of the great prophets of God, but what he did is no more valuable than the work anyone who follows God’s call, whether they are an officer in a church, a Sunday school teacher, someone who cares for the homeless, or someone who mails out postcards just to make people happy.

Listen for God’s call. And when God does call—answer. Find your gift and use it. It is power. Amen.