

1:4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

1:5 "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."

1:6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

1:7 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,

1:8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

1:9 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.

1:10 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."

"Nathan, please go brush your teeth." *"I can't, the toothpaste is on the high shelf."* "Nathan, please eat your fish sticks." *"I can't, they aren't cut up."* "Nathan, please buckle your seatbelts." *"I can't, my arm is sore."* Excuses—my life is full of excuses as to why my dear son cannot do the things I ask of him. But, I'm not too worried as he seems to be in good company when it comes to making up excuses.

The Bible is full of people who are full of excuses. There are otherwise fine people who do not want to do what God calls them to do because they feel unqualified and incompetent and so, they make up excuses. Today we have Jeremiah, who responds to God calling him to be a prophet saying—"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Jeremiah thinks that he is too young to be a prophet. Before him we had Moses—when God spoke to Moses and asked him to return to Egypt to free the Israelites from slavery Moses replied, "Master, please, I don't talk well. I've never been good with words, neither before nor after you spoke to me. I stutter and stammer." Moses thinks that he is not eloquent enough to lead the Israelites. And before him there is Sarah, who laughs at God when told she will have a baby because she thinks that she is too old. And yet, the excuses mean nothing to God because God sees us as God made us—not as the world sees us or as we think the world has made us. As God told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you . . ." God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows that the excuses are just that—excuses and that we can do what God calls us to do, wants us to do, needs us to do—regardless of whether or not we feel up to the task.

Now don't hear me wrong, the excuses we make are often quite legitimate. They are based on real life situations and experiences that we have had, or are having, that make us feel less than adequate. Our excuses are born in the stories we tell ourselves—because they are the stories we have been told about ourselves—by family, friends, the media, coworkers, the list goes on and on. However, these experiences and situations do not have to be the essential parts of our stories. They are things that have happened to us or conditions with which we live, but they are not who we are. This kind of thinking comes from a branch of psychotherapy known as narrative therapy whose motto is, "The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem." So, the alcoholic is not the problem, the alcohol is the problem. In narrative therapy, there is what is known as the "Old Story" and then there is the "Preferred Story". Our "Old Stories" are those stories about ourselves that limit us and pigeon-hole us. Our "Preferred Stories" are the new stories we can shape and claim that are, yes, influenced by the old stories but are not stories based on victimization or helplessness, but rather stories based on gratitude for survival and the possibility of a better life.

Let me offer an explanation by means of an illustration. I used to belong to the public speaking group Toastmasters. It was a great group of people comprised primarily of sales people, managers, and public figure-types, with the exception of one guy—Paul. Paul is an engineer at Munson. He spends his days making sure that the systems at his workplace—like heat, lights, exhaust, air conditioning, etc.—are in good working order. Paul is a self-proclaimed introvert and has a pronounced stutter. He is far from the

typical Toastmaster, indeed, it amazed me that he was a part of the group in the first place. But he once explained to us, in a heart-felt and candid speech, that if he wasn't in Toastmasters, he would give in to the temptation to just stay at home in his workshop by himself where he is safe, comfortable, and doesn't have to talk to anyone. But Paul felt called to do more. He knows he is a better parent because he is willing to get out there and try something challenging. He is better at his job because he can communicate more clearly—though still with a stutter—because he took the risk of being a Toastmaster. If Paul would have lived out his “Old Story”, the story that tells him that an introvert with a stutter belongs in a basement workshop instead of in a public speaking group, he would not be the person he is today and I would not be the person I am today and I think other folks who had the honor of being in Toastmasters with Paul would tell you the same. Because though Paul was not the most eloquent speaker and did not win the most awards, he was, by far, the most inspiring Toastmaster. To this day, when I think that a challenge is too great or a prospect too uncomfortable, I think of Paul. I think of him standing up there, smiling no less, in front of a room of people—speaking—speaking through the stutter and the anxiety and the discomfort. Paul is living his “Preferred Story”. He is living a story—not of victimization and limitations—but rather a story of gratitude and possibility.

And the thing of it is, I can, we can, all live our “Preferred Stories” no matter what our “Old Stories” may be because our “Preferred Stories” are the stories that God calls us to live. We see it in this morning's gospel lesson about the crippled woman. Like Toastmaster Paul, the crippled woman could have stayed at home—where her “Old Story” told her she belonged—away from the “normal” people, far away from temple on the Sabbath. But she refused to be the victim—of the crippling or of society's rejection of her—and instead she was able to see herself through God's eyes and knowing that God could make her well, and seeing Jesus—the bridge to God—right there in front of her—she looked to him, as best she could—she looked at him—the author of her “Preferred Story”, a story that began the moment he laid his hands on her and she could stand up straight.

God sees past the ailments and incidents, the failed relationships and hurts, the world's labels and limits for us, God sees past those and through those into our most inner selves—not the selves that have been kicked around, bruised, and beaten by this sometimes harsh world in which we live—but into our true selves—the self of us that God's own self has made. God knows that God has given us everything we need in order to do what God wants us to do. And when we believe that, when we know that in our hearts and bodies, we can set aside the “Old Story” in which we, like Jeremiah proclaim, “But I am too young” or “I am too old” or “I am too sick” or “I am too stupid” or “I am too fat” or “I am too damaged” or “I am too ashamed” or “I am too afraid” because while we may feel those things and while the world might try to make us a character in that “Old Story”, God does NOT believe those things about us. God knows us better than that. As God said to Moses when Moses said he couldn't speak well enough, “And who do you think made the human mouth? And who makes some mute, some deaf, some sighted, some blind? Isn't it I, God? So, get going. I'll be right there with you—with your mouth! I'll be right there to teach you what to say.”

God is right there with us, teaching us, as we transition from our “Old Story” of hurt and fear to our new story, our “Preferred Story” of gratitude and possibility—the story into which God writes us—the Greatest Story Ever Told. This is our story, a story of New Beginnings.