Each one of us is trying to fully become the person God intends us to be. There are two large types of challenges that can keep us from becoming what God intends for us. These challenges are illustrated by the two stories we heard in our scripture readings; the story of Jeremiah and the story of the bent over woman in the Gospel of Luke.

The first set of challenges is illustrated by the story of Jeremiah. The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah 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." Then Jeremiah said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

Jeremiah has a vocation to be a prophet. God has given Jeremiah the gifts he will need to be a prophet. But Jeremiah does not understand. Jeremiah does not see the gifts God has given him. God consecrated Jeremiah and appointed him for a purpose, but Jeremiah is resistant.

It is difficult for Jeremiah to see the gifts God has given him and it is difficult for us to see the gifts God has given us. It is difficult for us to understand how we should best use the gifts we have been given. This is the first set of challenges for us as we try to become what God intends for us.

This story of Jeremiah seems so real because I have seen it happen this way with so many people, including myself, in real life. A few people think they don’t have any gifts, they think they aren’t good at anything, so they don’t do much of anything. That’s a big problem. A few people think they can do anything and that they are the best at everything. They don’t listen to other people and they always think they are right. That’s a very big problem.

But most of us are like Jeremiah. We don’t understand the best way for us to use the gifts we have been given. We just don’t see very accurately the gifts God has given us. We don’t treat the powers we have as gifts from God. We don’t think the real powers we have been given are anything special.

Many years ago I had a boy in my third grade class. I’ll call him Ralph. Ralph was a capable student. His report card was full of Bs with a few higher and lower grades. Ralph’s mother came into school for her parent conference at the end of the first quarter. I’ll never forget our conversation. Ralph’s mother fretted over Ralph’s grades and complained that he should be doing better. Ralph’s mother insisted that if Ralph would just work harder, he could get As in every subject, like his older sister.

To the best of my recollection I said something like, “Ralph is wonderful student. The thing you do not see is that your son is friends with every single child in this classroom. Your son is the one who will be happy to go over to the corner and talk to the child that everyone else is ignoring. Please don’t expect him to be exactly like your daughter. I know he will be very successful in life because he gets along with everyone.”

Ralph’s mom might have spent years pushing her son to do better and better, trying to make him be expert in something that wasn’t really his gift. It was difficult for Ralph’s mom to see the powerful gift of her son’s friendliness, his willingness to talk and work and play with everyone.

It is similarly difficult for us to see the power of the gifts God has given us, the things we do easily, every day, almost without thinking. Sometimes we spend years trying to become expert in some sort of work that isn’t really what we are supposed to do. It is difficult for us to feel like God has consecrated our lives as we are, not as we would hope to become someday, after years and years of struggle. It is difficult for us to see that God has appointed us for a purpose in this world.
The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah 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." God says to us, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." God’s desire is for us to use the gifts God has given us, to become fully ourselves.

The story of the bent over woman in the Gospel of Luke illustrates the second set of challenges we face as we seek to become what God intends for us. Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. We don’t know much about this woman except that she was Jewish, a daughter of Abraham, and that her disease was so severe, she wasn’t able to stand up straight. This woman’s disease led to harsh judgment from other people, because most people assumed that serious diseases and disabilities were divine punishment for evil behavior.

This woman faced another major challenge in life, which was that she was a woman. In Jesus’ time, in most places, a woman’s status, the opportunities available to her, were always connected to a man, usually to her father or her husband or to a son. Women did not even sit next to the men in the synagogue. But Jesus saw this woman on the other side of the synagogue and called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath. It was against the rules. It was against the rules to do any work on the sabbath. It was against the rules for a man to touch a woman who was not a family member. And it was very much against the rules for a man to touch a crippled woman.

We can be fairly certain this woman was judged harshly by everyone else around her because of her illness or disability. We can be fairly certain people did not listen to her voice. We can be fairly certain she was not treated with respect by men. We can be fairly certain she was not treated with respect by other women.

We can only guess that this woman’s life had been extremely difficult for the past seventeen or eighteen years. This is when Jesus calls over to her, on the other side of the synagogue, and asks her to come near.

Sometimes it is like this for us. We have been having a difficult time for seventeen or eighteen days, or seventeen or eighteen months, or seventeen or eighteen years. God is calling to us, encouraging us, even as others judge us unfairly. God is calling us out, encouraging us to stand up straight and live fully into the lives God intends for us.

What is holding you back? What are the burdens you need to leave behind? What are the rules that people have created that seem to go against the rules of God’s love? What is the life God intends for you?

Given the way we are treated by others it is sometimes hard to believe, but God has consecrated your life. God has created you with a powerful set of gifts. God’s desire is for you to be freed from the burdens that are keeping you from using the gifts you have been given. God has appointed you for a purpose in this world.