

Our Call

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

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."

Imagine Jeremiah being a candidate to be pastor of our church. If asked for his qualifications to serve as a pastor or preacher, he would say he was chosen in the womb for this opportunity. He would say that he tried as a young boy to make a career change, but that God said he would give him the words he would need, thus explaining his lack of a seminary degree. The interview ends and Jeremiah, as a pastoral candidate, would disappear. Jeremiah might be muttering on his way out the door about plucking up and pulling down, adding the message to destroy and overthrow. The search committee would be thinking that this is the last thing we need to hear. They would never even hear Jeremiah talk about building up and planting.

Calls from God are scary. Tell someone God spoke to you, and you might be locked up. Maybe your call was not exactly a voice. It could be a thought you cannot shake—an idea that seems crazy or irrational. You try to ignore it, but it seems to be there again and again. The owls that bring Harry Potter invitations to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry were like a call from God. Harry's less-than-kind foster parents

tried, as best they could, to destroy the invitations. They even tried escaping to a remote cabin on an island. Finally the umpteenth letter arrived personally delivered by an angry giant of a man named Hagrid. God's call was like this for Jeremiah—it was relentless and inevitable. **George H. Martin**

My call was not unlike Jeremiah's in many ways, yet very different. As a youth I felt the call, but because of the denomination I was a part of I was taught that God didn't call women into ministry, so the closest thing I might come to was a missionary to some far away land. But single women did go off to foreign countries alone, so God would have to arrange for me to marry someone who wanted to be a missionary. I went to college and my only religion class was a comparison of the gospels taught as literature...still no young suitor who wanted to be a missionary. I moved to Detroit and became the victim of clergy sexual misconduct...I was convinced I was damaged goods and totally disqualified for any call that God may have had before. Then there was marriage and children and even if God wanted to call me I was getting older and my opportunities for accepting my call had passed me by. Then in 2001 the Disciples Women nominated me to be their president, with responsibilities of being a retreat speaker. In 2003, at age 50, I met a 60-year old woman who was in seminary. She encouraged me to go for it and accept God's call. I researched the cost of a seminary degree and was convinced that it would be too great of a financial burden for my family, especially since 4 sons needed assistance paying for their educations. Then in 2004 God opened a window for me to go to seminary, gave me a study-mate, taught me how to budget my money, the Michigan Regional church gave financial support and Leroy fed us on those long nights of study and paper writing. I was doing supply preaching for a congregation in Wyandotte when Bill Parker asked me to come to preach for Unity and see if we were a good fit for each other. That was the fall of 2009 and you allowed me to accept my call to pastoral ministry.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke to something many of us know; we do not choose God; God somehow mysteriously and even against our will chooses us. Jeremiah said that he heard the word of the Lord. The real sense of the passage is that the word of the Lord *happened to him*. This was an event. Not only had God followed him like a spiritual detective from the beginning, but with God's awesome command of logic there was a response to every objection. Jeremiah was not going to slip out into the night undetected and go on his merry way. It was an event and God had him. Maybe that is what God has in mind for each person, each of us—some moment, some awareness, when we say yes to God.

Acceptance or resignation usually happens only after struggle, and that was true in this story. Jeremiah was not easily cornered, especially not after being asked to be a prophet to all the nations, a terrifying idea at any time. The Hebrew word for nations, *goyim*, referred in the natural discourse of that day to the enemies of Israel, to those who sought its destruction. God's vision for his job was about as difficult as any sane Israelite could imagine.

Jeremiah was so desperate to wiggle out of his call that he tried the strategy first attempted by Moses, who said he could not speak. Making excuses really is not new. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve and continues today. "Oh, I could not do that. I'm just a layperson. I never went to seminary." "I don't have very much to give. I'm not very good with kids...teens...adults...seniors." "I am too new to this church to help much." We sound like Jeremiah all over again, even though the stakes for him were enormous.

Actually the reasons for not doing something that relates to God's work are often reasonable and justifiable. Most of us are not trained for these tasks, or if trained, we are ill prepared. Yet if God's call is about skills or experience, God did not tell it to Jeremiah. God did not say, "Don't worry, I have a trade school for prophets. You will get it all there." Instead, God said, "Do not be afraid," which just happens to be an angelic message rather common in the biblical story, because we are fearful people.

"Fear not" is an offer of salvation and a promise of protection. God's promise was to shade or guard Jeremiah. At the heart of his call, and maybe of every call, is the Twenty-third Psalm all over again. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil". That means God will shadow me, not death. That was God's promise to Jeremiah and it is God's promise to each of us as well. No matter how far we may go from the call of God, no matter how many reasonable excuses we may offer, God is there watching out for us and even giving us words to say.

In Jeremiah's case the words touched his lips. At another point he ate the word of God. We may not frame it exactly like that, but we talk about not being able to escape some word or some truth. We talk about having a story inside of us. We say we live with a certain hope or faith. Jeremiah might tell us that is what he meant.

Finally, the Lord told Jeremiah that he was appointed as a prophet. The Hebrew verb translated as "appoint" really means "put into office". There is just one career track. Jeremiah got the corner office right away: his prophet nameplate was on the door; his calling cards were printed, his wardrobe chosen. In this regard, we are probably the lucky ones. As baptized Christians no one can identify us by what we wear. Our faith is evidenced by what we do and what we say. Our call to serve the God who shadows us is to speak a word of truth in daily life. We are asked to respect the dignity of every human being. Hardest of all, and easily the riskiest road we dare, is the road that seeks justice and counters evils, letting the face of Christ emerge in love of neighbor. Sometimes we must even speak a word of judgment or just say no. This calling will never be easy if it is the calling of God. To do these things is to recognize those holy moments and touches of grace that really do plant and build up. **George H. Martin**

God's call is for each of us. Maybe you are not called to be a prophet or preacher, but you are called to share God's love with everyone we meet.