

Prophet to the Nations

Jeremiah 1:4-10

This reading from Jeremiah tells of God's call to prophet. This provides us an opportunity to look at the meaning of Christian calling or vocation. What does it mean to be called by God? What does God generally call people to do? To whom does God issue this call? Do only ministers experience a call, or is it an essential part of every Christian's religious life?

One of the challenges presented by the story of Jeremiah's calling is that it tempts us to think of vocation as something reserved for great figures of religious history—prophets, evangelists, and missionaries. The truth is that God calls every Christian to live the radical gospel of Christ through faithful obedience in the world. For some, that faithful obedience may require grand utterance, heroic measures, or world-changing actions. For others of us, it is in fulfilling the tasks of our social, political, and family roles that we stand as prophets in the cultural wilderness, testifying to God's intentions for the world in the way we live our lives.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) defined vocation as "the event in which [persons are] set and instituted in actual fellowship with Jesus Christ, namely, in the service of His prophecy,... and therefore in the service of God and [their fellow human beings]." In other words, Christian calling is not just reserved for those asked to do mighty things. It is the invitation to every Christian to witness to the gospel by investing with radical grace whatever worldly roles God opens to us. John Calvin assured, "No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight." As Martin Luther famously said about parenthood, when understood as Christian vocation, even changing dirty diapers is done for the glory of God!

Jeremiah's response to his call is particularly noteworthy. Many Christian theologians have taken the prophet's reference to his youth as metaphorical; Jeremiah was emphasizing his inexperience and unsuitability for this kind of charge. Whether or not we read his

objection as an accurate reflection of his chronological age may not matter much. What is important is that Jeremiah resisted the call of God because he believed himself not up to the task. By his misgivings Jeremiah is the "every person's" prophet; he shows us that fear, anxiety, resistance, inadequacy, even resentment are understandable reactions to the call to represent God in the world, and these feelings do not disqualify us from serving God's intentions.

Neither our achievement nor our confidence qualifies us to answer the call of God. Instead, it is *God* who prepares us to live out the vocation for which we were created. God insisted to Jeremiah that "before I formed you in the womb I knew you." God's statement testifies to divine providence and election, in which the idea of vocation is rooted. Jeremiah's selection as prophet has nothing to do with his capabilities for the job, but is made prior to his exhibiting any prophetic "qualities." God declares that the assignment of Jeremiah's role was made before he was able to do anything to merit his selection. As the English Puritan William Ames remarked, our calling "does not depend on the dignity, honesty, industry, or any endeavor of the ones called, but only upon the election and predestination of God."

Calls from God are scary. Tell someone God spoke to you, and you might be locked up. Maybe your call is 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. God's call to Jeremiah was relentless and inevitable.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks to something many of us know; we do not choose God; God somehow mysteriously and even against our will chooses us. Jeremiah says 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 has God followed him like a spiritual detective from the beginning, but with God's awesome command of logic there is 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—some moment, some awareness, when we say yes to God.

Jeremiah is 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 this job was about as difficult as any sane Israelite could imagine.

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." "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 does not tell this to Jeremiah. God does not say, "Don't worry, I have a trade school for prophets. You will get it all there." Instead, God says, "Do not be afraid," which just happens to be an angelic message rather common in the biblical story.

"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 this 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 is God's promise to Jeremiah and 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.

Does this mean there is no correspondence between God's intentions for our lives and the abilities and predispositions we develop? The experience of prophets like Jeremiah and Moses suggests not, but something is lost in assuming that God always calls us to be and do what does *not* come "naturally" to us. While God sometimes asks us to take up roles and responsibilities for which we may at the advent feel ill suited, often God prepares us for our calling *through* the interests and abilities we cultivate. Rather than insisting on a single form

for divine calling, Jeremiah's story simply reminds us that both the calling to serve and the capacity to fulfill that calling come from God. God is the sudden source of Jeremiah's capability to fulfill his vocation.

In Jeremiah's case the words touch his lips. At another point he eats 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.

Of all the Old Testament reports of the calling of prophets, Jeremiah's call is most similar to Moses. All these report an encounter with God, a commission to do the Lord's will or speak the Lord's word, and a ritual act or sign symbolizing the designated role. We may conclude from the persistence of this feature in vocation reports that resistance is not linked so much to individual personalities as it is to the very experience of standing in the presence of the Holy One and being called as God's servant. It goes with the office to feel unworthy or inadequate.

One of the most important aspects of this report concerns the meaning and authority of the prophetic word. In the first place, the words of the prophet are to be those the Lord gives him. The Old Testament prophets were messengers bearing revelations from their God. Over and over again their speeches begin or end with expressions such as "thus says the Lord," or "This is what the Lord has said." Secondly, it is equally clear that the prophetic words are not idle talk but powerful (see [Amos 1:2](#)). In fact, the Lord does not actually tell Jeremiah what to say but what to do. To have the words of God in one's mouth is to be "set... over nations... to pluck up and to break down" ([v. 10 RSV](#)). As in [Genesis 1](#), when God speaks, it is so. Small wonder that anyone called by God to speak such a word would be reluctant to take on the task. **Gene M. Tucker**

Fear isn't infidelity or evil; we have good cause to be afraid. Scott Bader-Saye nailed the issue: excessive fear is "when we allow the avoidance of evil to trump the pursuit of the good... Our overwhelming fears need to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things."

Finally, the Lord tells Jeremiah that he is appointed as a prophet. A Hebrew scholar said that the verb translated as "appoint" really means "put into office". There is just no career track. Jeremiah gets the corner office right away: his prophet nameplate is on the door, his calling cards are printed, his wardrobe chosen. In this regard, we are probably the lucky ones.

The reading ends with the specifics of Jeremiah's commission, to speak a word of judgment to Judah in the shadow of international threats. In our time, a couple of things are important about this commission. Against a view of religion as essentially a private matter, God puts words into the mouth of the prophet that give him authority "over nations and over kingdoms" The word of God is a dynamic force that at times stands in opposition to the apathy of culture and politics. Although the overall tenor of Jeremiah's commission is judgment, the destructive imperatives are followed by a constructive pair; Jeremiah is appointed not only "to pluck up and to pull down" but "to build and to plant." Interestingly, Jeremiah uses four verbs for this deconstruction: break down, pluck up, overthrow, and destroy, but only two for the new creation. New life is God's proper work. **James C. Howell** Here we see the necessary cooperation between judgment and good news, essential to the gospel. Jeremiah is commissioned to take to God's people the message of death *and* rebirth—so that even in the forecast of judgment lies the promise of new life. **James Calvin Davis**

Let me tell you of my own call to ministry. As a child I felt the call to ministry, but thought it was to be a missionary or clergy spouse since the denomination of which I was a part did not ordain women for pastoral ministry. I went away to college and made many inappropriate decisions: too many parties, too many boyfriends, too make things that disqualified me for ministry. Then came work and marriage and other inappropriate decisions if I wanted to answer God's call. So, I redefined my call. It was in Christian education: so I worked with teenagers and then with kindergarten and first graders; and I was happy in that ministry. Then I was called by the regional minister in 1999 to be the women consultant, a position I held for 2 ½ years. When I became International Christian Women's Fellowship president I was invited to do women's retreats in various regions of the United States and Canada and I wanted to be knowledgeable in my presentations. I asked if I could

do the licensed ministry program but was refused. Then in 2004 God opened a door. I could attend a Canadian seminary that had a satellite program in a suburb of Detroit, attending classes only one night per week. My friend Diane went with me to open house and said as we were driving home, we can do this! The regional minister, Morris Finch, approved my participation in the program. The cost was one half to one third of what the American seminaries were charging at that time. When we finished our Masters of Theological Studies Diane said “we may as well get the Masters of Divinity as we aren’t getting any younger and it’s not going to get cheaper!” I was ordained in November 2008 and Diane and I graduated in May of 2009, having completed our course work in December 2008. Mid-way through seminary my pastor, Rev. Rufus Lewis, and the regional minister gave me numerous opportunities to preach, along with the Disciples Women. After a few months of supply preaching at First Congregational Church of Wyandotte, you called me to Unity so we could get acquainted. You blessed me three and a half years ago by calling me to be your pastor. My call is to teach the word of God and to love you as children of the most high God.

I was like Jeremiah, with feeling of inadequacy and fear that I was not up to the challenge. But God has touch my mouth and asked to speak God’s words to the nations. I have been blessed to speak from Oregon to Virginia; from Nova Scotia to Florida; in India and Brazil; to brothers and sisters of the Stone Campbell movement from Africa, Asia, India, the Middle East, Europe, North and South America, Australia and New Zealand. I have shared with the Greater Flint Church Women United.

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** Your story of call may be very different from mine, but at your

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baptism, God touched you and gave you a ministry to do. It may be frightening, but God will be with you. Go and do what God has empowered you to do!

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